

A LADY'S
WICKED
REVENGE

HENRIETTA
HARDING

A Lady's Wicked Revenge

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

HENRIETTA HARDING

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Table of Contents

A Lady's Wicked Revenge

Table of Contents

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A Lady's Wicked Revenge

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Eyes in the Shadows

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Epilogue

Treating a Sinful Earl

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

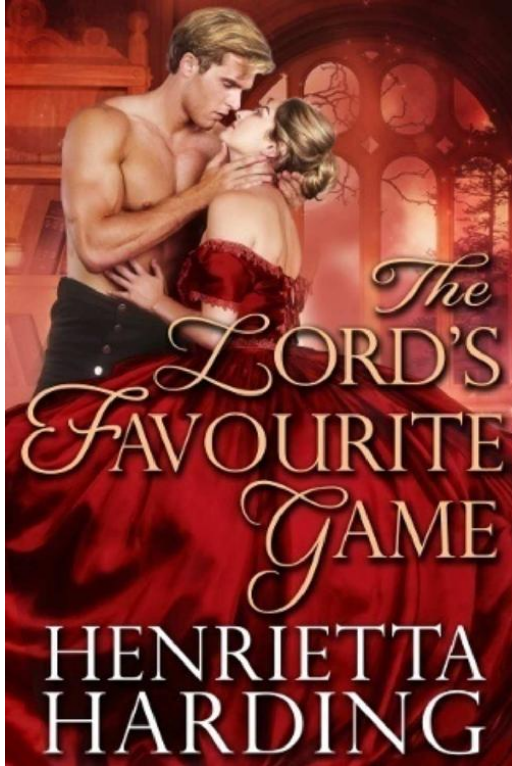
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A Lady's Wicked Revenge

Introduction

After her parents were tragically killed in an accident, Diana Hann is forced to live with her despicable uncle. As if that were not enough, he wants to marry her off cheaply so he can rob her of her inheritance. Desperate with grief and furious with her evil guardian, Diana is devastated... Until the most unusual, tempting man appears. Who is this mysterious, witty stepson; a friend or a passionate admirer? Will he be the one to set her heart on fire or ruin her once and for all?

When living in the Devil's lair...

The enticing Colin Mullens has everything he needs in life to thrive; education, a sharp tongue and a fierce stepfather, Sir James Leeson. Even if Sir James could be spiteful or arrogant at times, Colin will always be grateful. Yet, his perfect world begins to shutter when he gets to know better the tantalising woman living under the same roof. Is he really willing to risk his proper future as Sir James' heir for his enthralling attraction to this intelligent, seductive Lady?

While dark family secrets are being revealed they will have to make a choice...

Diana and Colin discover in one another a burning flame more

thrilling than anything they have ever imagined. No matter how much they long for each other, their love is tested when Diana discovers the horrible truth about her parents' fate. Is it possible for passionate love to persist if it was built on a wicked scheme? Or will it vanish forever?

Chapter 1

Bound by Blood

The night was rent asunder with a cacophony of splintering wood, crunching metal, and terrified screams. Glass rained through the air like a thousand glittering daggers and the wail of dying horses mingled with all too human shrieks.

“William!”

That was the only word she could detect among the noise from her helpless position. She saw every detail as clear as day, as though from every angle at once.

“William! Help me!”

She twisted and struggled but felt herself held back from the scene of the ruined carriage by shadowy, unseen hands. Blood filled the air, filled her mouth to stifle her screams as she wrenched herself in place in an effort to run to the aid of the poor souls who were dying before her eyes.

Another sound from over her shoulder. She twisted herself to peer in that direction and saw, as she shook her head in mute agony, another carriage flying end over end before exploding into a twisted wreck of blood and black iron. It caught fire as a lamp met dry wood, and like a matchstick, the wreckage turned into a vibrant orange inferno.

“William!”

Another collision, this time from the other direction. Then another she could not see, and another. The screams grew louder and bled into an inhuman chorus of pain. She could not shut her ears, could not cover her eyes, or run away. When she opened her mouth to scream, she felt the insubstantial penumbral bonds leap into her throat and choke her.

“No!”

With a pained cry that issued from the deepest part of herself, Diana threw herself forward. As ever, the vigour of her awakening was overmatched by the serenity of her surroundings. She fought to draw in one shuddering breath after another, and her nightly visitation receded once more into nothing more or less than the usual pall of dread that never lifted from her.

Diana blinked, looking around and trying to put together a coherent picture of where she was. *The painting of Grandfather*, she thought with a chill, her eyes roving over unfamiliar furnishings. *It's gone! And where's my lamp, the one Father brought me from ...?*

All at once, her faculties returned to her. Diana sighed deeply, more despondent than relieved. *Uncle James' house. Of course. The same as yesterday, and the day before.*

“Stupid girl,” she muttered, unclenching her fingers from the bedclothes. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and gingerly set her bare white feet on the elegant if threadbare rug. She rubbed her eyes, breathing in the stale air of the small bedroom that had been her home for these last three weeks.

Diana's eyes fluttered back open. They flitted from one hateful detail of the room to the next—from drab, dusty curtains to an insultingly childish music box to the shabby armoire where the few clothes she was allowed were kept. Her eyes narrowed, infuriated at how ... normal it was all becoming to her. She knew there was nothing really wrong with any of it. Not really, anyway. It would have been a perfectly nice room for a perfectly nice young woman.

But it wasn't supposed to be Diana's. She was supposed to be at her home, and her parents were supposed to be alive.

Sometimes I wonder if it would not be better to remain in a dream for the rest of my days rather than wake and face the terrors of this wretched world of ours, thought Diana with what was quickly becoming a familiar sense of misery. She shook at the thought; her mind shot through with vivid memories of the carriage wreck that came upon her each night. *Come to think of it, perhaps waking is a kindness, compared to having to see that every time I close my eyes ...*

A sudden, jarring sound echoed through the chamber, once again setting Diana's heart racing. She shrank from the sound, the primitive part of her brain sending electric fear through her limbs. It took her an eternity that lasted all of a second to realise there was someone gently knocking on the door.

"W-what do you ...that is, ah, yes, come in!" Diana called, words slipping from her as though she were trying to take hold of the very air.

For God's sake, Diana, pull yourself together! she thought, putting a hand to her chest as though willing her heart to slow its flight.

The door slid open quietly, revealing a ruby-red nose and a kindly smile. “Good morning, Missus Fessler,” said Diana in as calm a voice as she could muster.

The matronly old woman answered this greeting with a curt nod and a muttered *tut-tut-tut*. As ever, Missus Fessler hardly slowed her awkward shuffling stride from the moment she walked into the room, throwing open the curtains and picking linens from the floor even as she sang her melancholy song.

“More nightmares, I expect, Miss Diana, what a pity. I told Sir James that he must have a word with Mister Davenport about a sleeping draught or the like, you know, but he must not have had the time. And I know for a fact that George downstairs, in the kitchen—you know George, you must, with the port-wine stain on his neck? He has a bottle of something that he always shares with me whenever I catch a snuffle, and I’m sure it would do wonders for helping you sleep. But then, I suppose you don’t have much call to talk to young George, do you? Ah, more’s the pity.”

Despite the rock-hard lump of sorrow that stayed in its cold nest in Diana’s breast, she could not help smiling at the old housekeeper’s prattle. The woman’s capacity to talk truly seemed to be endless, but Diana still felt grateful for the crumbs of sympathy Missus Fessler never failed to scatter in her presence.

With a start, Missus Fessler stopped before Diana and looked at her as though for the first time, consternation on her face. “Well, just look at us, chatting the whole morning away like a couple of empty-headed hens! And with you having slept half the morning away! Don’t mistake me; it’s good to see you sleeping soundly, or at least late. But not today of all days, when you’re expected in Sir James’ study in a quarter of an hour!”

Diana grimaced. Ever since he had been named as her guardian, Uncle James always seemed to have some expectations or other for where she was to go and what she needed to do. "I thought I would break my fast here in my room for a change. Surely Uncle James can survive a meal without me," she said glumly. A twinge of pain shot through her shoulder, and Diana reached back to rub it—her nightmares tended to leave her sore from hours of thrashing about and clenching her muscles, she found.

Missus Fessler gave her a wry expression. "I can't say as I blame you, Miss Diana. Not sure I could stomach my own breakfast in Sir James' company, not that you heard me tell you any such thing." Diana giggled at this quip. "Only you and your digestion will have to wait until tomorrow for that. Your uncle has someone for you to meet."

"What's that?" Diana asked, trying to keep the dread out of her voice. "Uncle James didn't mention any such meeting to me."

There was a flash of pity in Missus Fessler's eyes. She sighed, her stout body deflating. "Of course he didn't," she grumbled, turning to withdraw clothing from Diana's armoire. "No need to say anything to Miss Diana, sir, of course not. It's not as though she might have any opinion on how or when she might want to be introduced to Mister Dunn ... or whether at all she even—"

"Dunn?" Diana's mind raced for a moment before she put her finger on it. "You mean that Gerard Dunn I keep hearing Uncle James mention? The second son of a family in the ... shipping business, was it?"

"Third son, I believe. Not that they tell me such things, of course. Er

... begging your pardon, Miss.”

Diana swallowed, and the anxious pit in her chest descended to twist and churn in her stomach. *Gerard Dunn ... are you really in such a hurry to get rid of me, Uncle James?*

Seeing the expectant look on Missus Fessler’s face and not wishing to get the kindly old woman in trouble with her employer, Diana gamely rose to her feet and let her body be carried through the motions of dressing and arranging her hair. All the while, though, as the housekeeper kindly if hurriedly assisted her with these tasks, Diana’s mind drifted back to the first moment she had set foot in the house that had become a prison to her.

It had all seemed like a mistake, then, like a dream or an amateur play, or some silly error that would be corrected before long, as soon as the responsible parties made their appearance and sorted things out with a chuckle. None of it had seemed real.

Even as she was greeted by the man she was told by kind Mister Arnold would be her guardian, Uncle James—a man she knew only faintly from half-remembered family dinners and holidays—Diana had taken it all with a good-natured shake of her head and a weary smile.

It wasn’t until Diana had laid down in the bed in James Leeson’s guest room that she realised for good and all that this was a dream there would be no waking from. And that first long, sleepless night, Diana had been unable to rid her mind’s eye of the cold, cruel, mirthless smile on Uncle James’ face.

His voice echoed in her ears, stealing the air from her breath as she realised this man was to be in charge of her, was to hold all of her

affairs in his bony grey hand. This stranger, this miser—*this* man was to be her future.

I still can scarcely believe he and Mother share blood; they are so dissimilar. Diana stifled a sob at the thought of her beloved mother, who had always been so steadfastly kind, patient, supportive ... everything a mother should be, she thought.

And somehow she was sister to Uncle James, a man Diana learned anew every day was a crueller man than any she had ever had the misfortune of encountering. Yet indeed, such was her misfortune that in the absence of any other living relation, James Leeson was entrusted with her destiny. Diana was bound to him by blood as well as by law; he was her guardian.

When that thought truly sank into the firmament of Diana's mind that night ... that was when she began to cry.

She did not stop for three days or more. Neither did she eat nor drink. Trays of food were delivered and sent back or left to moulder on the table. There were times when Diana had prayed that she might pass away into whatever afterlife had claimed her beloved parents rather than spend another second in the same house as her wretched, grasping uncle. Eventually, that wish passed away into the numb, half-drowned misery that lingered over her still, and she allowed herself to go through the motions of life.

But even still, weeks later, when Diana remembered that this seemingly heartless man was her guardian, she felt her stomach turn.

"There you are, pretty as a picture!"

Diana blinked, suddenly pulled back into the moment. Reflected in front of her she saw Missus Fessler with a proud smile on her face, arms akimbo as she admired her work.

Still half-lost in her reverie, for an instant, the young woman Diana saw in the mirror before her looked strange and unfamiliar to her. The girl was indeed somewhat pretty, with a tangled mass of strawberry-blonde hair atop her heart-shaped face and icy blue eyes that looked as though they could cut glass. Her cheekbones were high and angular, and her skin as fair as milk.

Then Diana drew a breath, and she recognized a thousand changes to her appearance, as tiny as they were saddening. Her lips, at first looking rosy and flushed with health, now revealed little bloody marks from where she had worried at them with her teeth. The dark circles under her eyes that had been the cause of so much woe during her years of teenage vanity—they had widened now and darkened to the point that she looked as much a corpse as a girl of two-and-twenty. This effect was made all the more ghastly by how thin she had clearly grown over the past weeks.

“More a statue on a mausoleum than a picture ...” Diana allowed herself to grumble, turning away from the mirror and towards the door, where Missus Fessler was already tapping her foot impatiently.

The housekeeper moved to scuttle in front of her, but Diana stopped her with a gently outstretched hand. “Thank you, Missus Fessler, but I know the way by now.” Missus Fessler opened her mouth, probably with some jape or another ready to fire, but contented herself with a half-hearted bow of her head instead as Diana strode away purposefully.

Uncle James' house was not as large as the one where Diana had lived all her two-and-twenty years of life, though it was still a grand estate that belonged to one of London's wealthier families. On top of that, it was a confusingly designed edifice; that was beyond dispute. There seemed to be no end of strange dead-ended corridors and identical studies and libraries and such. On the single occurrence when she was allowed a walk in the gardens, Diana had examined the house from the outside but found herself more puzzled than ever about its geography.

The first time Diana had left her little bedroom here in search of something to eat, she had become terribly lost in the winding staircases and ended up in a wide, airy bedroom that seemed to have been sitting vacant for some time.

Stricken with curiosity for the first time since arriving, Diana found herself looking around in the room, inspecting the books on the nightstand and breathing in the strangely appealing musky smell that lingered on the curtains. Until, of course, Uncle James had appeared in the doorway and furiously ordered her back to her bedroom.

Diana had not dared to go exploring in the Leeson house since then.

Since that day, however, Missus Fessler had shown her the way to the only rooms that seemed to be allowed to her: her bedroom, Uncle James' study, the ladies' parlour. Strangely, Diana found herself with little desire to roam; once she would have ached to spend time poring over the extensive library or playing the dusty old piano in the sitting room. No longer. She hardly even saw anyone but Missus Fessler and Uncle James these days, having turned away visitors like her parents' friends, the Arnolds, in fits of grief. Now she would give anything to see a friendly face again.

I cannot decide which would be worse, thought Diana as she climbed the

stairs up to the third storey, clenching her teeth. *Being confined to this awful house for the rest of my days or being sold off like a brood mare to the highest bidder as Uncle James seems to wish so badly.*

The thought congealed into something foul in Diana's throat. Uncle James had said little to her that terrible evening when she first arrived, and she had understood even less of it at the time, so deep had she been in shock. It was only deep in the night when she had teased out the implications of all he said he intended for her and her house, her mother and father still barely cold beneath their shrouds.

That very night he had announced his intention to sell his dear sister's house, to dismiss all the Hann family staff—the loving souls who cared for Diana as if she were their own child. Most perplexing of all was his plan to find a suitable husband for Diana.

This was a song he would sing often, it turned out; virtually every time Diana was compelled to share a meal or other excursion with her uncle, he talked of this bachelor or that whom he thought would be likely to take Diana to wife for a sufficiently cheap dowry.

Always money with him, Diana thought, trying not to grind her teeth down into powder. *Never a question as to what I might need or want. Only concerns about how much more quickly and easily he can get his hands on Father's fortune.*

For herself, Diana had never given much of a thought to money. She was dimly aware that she and her family were reasonably well-off, with a full staff and a large house in a fashionable part of London and sufficient cash that she rarely, if ever, had to do without. Now, though, she was consumed by the thought that Uncle James was squandering her family's fortune on himself, secreting it away so he could line his own pockets. Each time she asked after her financial matters, he grumbled something derogatory about women's spending

habits and waved her away. It was only after a particularly heated shouting match that she had even got him to tell her—

“Ah, there you are.”

Diana drew in a breath to steel herself. She had been hoping the door to Uncle James’ study might be closed, as it usually was; this would give her a moment to catch her breath and ready herself before subjecting herself to whatever scheme he had lying in wait for her. Instead, Diana saw two pairs of eyes gazing out at her from the ornately furnished room.

Chapter 2

Eyes in the Shadows

James Leeson was not an unhandsome man. Despite the resentment she bore him day and night, Diana could not deny that he was always seen in the most stylish garments, and he obviously took a great deal of care in styling his grey hair and bushy moustache. This morning he appeared to have dressed himself to look even more impressive than usual, with a well-cut black suit and a diamond winking from his third finger.

Even so, it was plain to Diana that he was a man who was thoroughly uncomfortable with everyone and everything in his presence, starting with himself and his own station in the world. And though she now saw Uncle James in his preferred habitat, standing amid all his finest worldly possessions in his beloved study, she could scarcely notice anything at all apart from the ravenous hunger that suffused every part of the man.

Deciding she would tweak the man's nose with a bit of sweetness, Diana smiled at him from the doorway, curtsying gracefully. "Good morning, Uncle. Did you have a pleasant night's sleep?" From the sour expression on Uncle James' face at these words, Diana could see that her feigned politeness had not fooled him. She could not help herself from feeling some grim pleasure at that.

"Diana Hann," said James, gesturing to one side without acknowledging her question. "I'd like to introduce you to Mister Gerard Dunn." Diana had the misfortune of catching sight of the suggestive lift of her uncle's eyebrows at these words, and she felt her gorge rise for an instant until she turned to face the quiet young man.

Despite herself, Diana's first instinct was to note that the man was hardly the monster she had pictured over these last weeks of hearing

his name. Gerard had sandy blond hair neatly brushed to one side of his wide, lantern-jawed face.

His clothes were clearly expensive, though they seemed ill-fitting on his lanky frame somehow, as though the stiff black jacket and deep red cravat had once belonged to a smaller man. Gerard's dull brown eyes only darted up at her briefly before returning to look awkwardly at the floor.

What's the matter with this man? He seems to want to be here little more than I do. What could he be so afraid of?

"M-miss Hann," said Gerard, bowing stiffly. He reached out a hand, and for a moment, Diana feared he meant to kiss it, but he quickly returned his hands to nervously clutch in front of him. "It's, ah ... it's a pleasure to meet you." Their eyes met, and his crooked teeth showed in a warm, open smile.

What a perfectly ... adequate man. I suppose this could have turned out much worse, Diana thought, finding herself returning his smile with a polite, thin-lipped one of her own. Then a flash of anger shot through her at this idea. *It would have been easier if he had been a monster. Especially as I have no intention of marrying him.*

Saying nothing, Diana turned back to face her uncle, feeling Gerard shift his weight awkwardly at her side. Uncle James gave her a meaningful look, jerking his head briefly in the direction of Gerard. A tempest of anger was raging behind his staid façade, Diana saw. The last time she had defied him in front of others, he had been furious with her. Sighing softly, she faced Gerard once more, awaiting whatever pleasantries he intended to assail her with.

“So, you ... ah ...” Gerard rubbed the back of his head with one hand, glancing around the room as if in search of an appropriate conversation topic. “How are you ... that is, Sir James has a lovely home. Are you finding it to your liking?”

Diana looked at Uncle James with disbelief. *Does he really expect me to act well-mannered in the face of this kind of questioning?* The man’s shaggy eyebrows dipped ominously. “Yes, thank you,” Diana muttered in reply.

“Ah, good, good. That’s very ... good.” As he spoke his answer to this, Gerard’s voice grew lower and quieter, trailing away into nonverbal utterances of assent. This topic apparently exhausted, Diana waited in silence for a long while as Gerard tapped his fingers against one another anxiously, occasionally looking up to flash her an embarrassed smile.

Evidently, I must not only allow myself to be courted but I am expected to do all the work of courting myself? Diana felt her eyes narrow with anger. *And all for a marriage meant to please none but Uncle James?*

The idea of marriage had once held great appeal for Diana, as she imagined it did for most girls. She could hardly count the number of times her mother or father had lovingly chastised her about her constant daydreaming about this or that handsome young man of the ton. One day, she imagined, she would be swept off her feet by the son of some minor lordling.

In her more ambitious flights of fancy, she would be wooed by someone loftier if less likely—a dashing duke, say, or perhaps an exiled French nobleman. It hardly mattered who the particular gentleman was, she had said laughingly to her friends; no matter his identity, before long, she would meet her husband, have a grand wedding ceremony, and plumb the depths of nuptial bliss over

hundreds of happy days and happier nights.

But then, that had been before everything had gone wrong. And now, when she was in the very depths of grief, when all her true family was barely at rest in the cold earth—*now* was when Uncle James expected her to be obedient and submit to a quick and inexpensive marriage?

Not on my life, thought Diana, her rosy curls dancing around her as she set her chin in determination. *Uncle James may be my guardian and have the power to legally compel me to do as he bids, but he is not my father. No matter who he has chosen for me, I would sooner die than give him the satisfaction.*

Though it felt like a year or more of waiting, in truth, Diana could only take half a minute of this interaction before she curtsied once more to Uncle James. “Thank you for introducing us, Uncle. I am always pleased to make the acquaintance of one of your friends,” she said, hoping her unspoken request to be dismissed would be received.

Uncle James folded his arms and snorted like a bull. “Mister Dunn has travelled all morning for this visit,” he said in a clipped tone. “As a member of this household, Diana, I thought you might be a good enough hostess to take him to see the Leeson estate grounds, as he has no doubt heard so much about.”

“I scarcely know the place well enough to get around myself,” Diana blurted before she could stop herself. Uncle James’ smooth, full face flashed an alarming shade of pink. “... But of course, I would not want to be an ungracious hostess.”

The would-be patriarch nodded, his stony features relaxing somewhat at this concession. “Fine. Have Missus Fessler accompany you. Missus

Leeson and I will join you for a family luncheon in the dining room in an hour or so.” With that, he slumped back into his chair and turned back to his writing desk.

You can suffer through this encounter, if only to spare yourself unnecessary misery, Diana told herself, trudging out the door with Gerard in tow as she tried to restrain the urge to flee back into her room. *An argument in front of strangers will only set Uncle James more firmly in his position, stubborn ox that he is. Save the argument for later. You don't have to marry this man.*

After all, it's only a walk. What could possibly come of a little thing like that?

* * *

The Leeson estate's grounds were not terribly large and were in ill repair for all Uncle James' boastful talk. Even so, Diana found herself happy at last to be allowed to breathe fresh air and feel the warm sunshine on her face ... as fresh and warm as such things were here on the outskirts of London, that is.

“Well. I say ... it ... it really is a fine day today. Don't you think?”

Diana turned away from the path to crouch beside a cluster of thorny flowers, pretending not to have heard. *It would be all the finer if I did not have to pass it in such company*, she thought, forcing her face to retain a neutral expression.

Gerard cleared his throat, then sallied forth for another assault. “The,

ah ... well, I don't know what flowers these are, but they're quite lovely. I should say."

"Oh, no, sir, those columbine there?" Missus Fessler laughed in disbelief. "No, I'm afraid those are just wildflowers. Sir James would have Christopher pull them up if he ever came out to see them—he prefers more ... what does he say, *cultivated* blossoms."

"Ah, hm. Really?" Gerard stammered in reply. Diana smiled darkly, still facing away from the two. She recognized the tone in his voice of neither wanting to be rude nor encourage the woman to speak further on the subject. *You'll have to try harder than that, as well I've found*, she thought sardonically.

And speak Missus Fessler did. Her little steps carried her up to Gerard's side, her voice continuing in her singsong manner, "'Course, we called them granny's bonnet when I was a lass. A friend of mine out in the village, she and I once convinced a boy who was sweet on her to eat a whole fistful of them. Ha! Lad was sick enough that he soon enough left her alone. A pretty little flower, sure enough, but those can be the most dangerous of all, mind you me."

"Yes, I—" he tried to interject.

"Now, daisies are a much safer gift for a lady you've got your eye on, Mister Dunn. That, or marigolds, though of course, those won't ..."

Diana rolled her eyes and continued to walk briskly down the garden path, closing her ears to the continuing prattle. Though the garden was not terribly large and provided no cover, still she glanced about in search of somewhere she could run and hide while her suitor and chaperone were distracted. Seeing none, Diana sighed and continued

their walk along the path, staying a few steps ahead of her companions.

Unbidden, some old, familiar voice in Diana's mind cried out in objection to this behaviour. *What's so wrong with chatting with, by all accounts, a polite young man?* the voice chided her. *What kind of rude, heartless creature are you not to even engage in civil conversation? How can you let this poor boy make an arse of himself in front of your eyes?*

Diana snorted, as impatient with this voice as she was with all else intent on controlling what she did and felt. The very thought of engaging in societal niceties had become repugnant to her. Every raised eyebrow, every shaken head or wagged finger—she wanted to scream at them all, *'Don't you know my mother and father died, you merciless beast?'* The effort it took just to keep herself from melting into a puddle of grief-stricken sobs was so very overwhelming ... what right did anyone have to demand still more of her than that?

And then, horribly, a gentle voice: "I ... understand your parents recently passed away."

Diana froze in place, a cold hand wrapping around her heart. All contempt for the man and this futile courtship evaporated, replaced first by surprise at his shift away from tedious small talk, then by all the sorrow she struggled so terribly to keep at bay every waking moment of her days.

She turned to look at him, feeling herself fill with anger at having her emotions so callously exposed. She felt him step closer to her, his wiry form no more than a few feet behind her. For half a heartbeat, she worried he would put a hand on her shoulder—it would take true self-restraint not to lash out if he took such a liberty.

But the man simply stood there on the dry, rocky path, his feet shuffling awkwardly in place as before. “You have my condolences. I know how terribly it must hurt to—”

“Do you?” Diana snapped. “That’s most interesting, Mister Dunn. Have you lost your own parents as well, then?”

The lanky young man drew back at these words as though fearing for his life. Timidly he answered, “Well, I ... no, I haven’t. But I imagine it —”

“I see. You must have a most vivid imagination, then, sir. Not to say a terribly depressing one, to conjure such feelings without having lived through such an experience. My compliments to your mental prowess.” *Lord, the tears are coming now*, she realised. Diana drew up her mouth in a scowl, hoping she could frighten the looming despair away with a fit of anger as she had done before.

“I’m sorry. I know ...” Gerard stopped, looking around at their surroundings for some clue on how to proceed. Missus Fessler watched from the side, answering his glance with a sober shake of her head. His eyes flitted back to Diana, lip trembling. “That is, I ... I cannot know ... but I wish that ... that is ...”

At last, Diana could take no more of this. Without a word of warning, she picked up her skirts and sped up the path that led to the front door of the Leeson house. Over her shoulder, she thought she could hear Gerard raise his voice in protest, then Missus Fessler saying something to him in a gentle tone of voice.

Diana did not care—all she could think of now was getting away to

somewhere she could dissolve into tears without inviting any questions or stares. And as she did not hear any footsteps behind her by the time she reached the door, she sighed with relief, confident in having escaped this encounter. The tides of sorrow that had loomed so large within her mind began to recede, comforted with the knowledge that her refuge was at hand.

Uncle James will be furious for my having run off so abruptly. Diana swallowed, the thought sending fear shooting through her even as her fingers mechanically turned the knob and pushed open the door. *But that is an argument for another time.*

Diana doubted she would ever view entering James Leeson's estate as a pleasant experience, given her upsetting recent history in the home. But this time, she stepped across the threshold and was met not only with the cold dread that seemed to live in the very air of the place but with shock and alarm.

Just as she set foot in the entryway, hastening ahead of her walking companions in search of a moment's quiet, she saw a pair of wide, shining green eyes peering out at her from the shadows of an adjoining room. For an instant, Diana was surprised enough that she stopped dead in her tracks, putting a hand to her chest as her breath seized at the sight.

She could see little of the man in the darkened room, though she could make out a mop of dark tousled hair and a lustrous white cravat framing those striking green eyes, which still gazed at her with a disarming intensity. The man spoke not a word, his expression inscrutable as Diana finally forced herself to breathe once more.

Another one of Uncle James' vile lackeys, no doubt, Diana thought, resuming her walk towards the staircase. Apart from the household staff, her uncle seemed to have a veritable army of unsavoury

characters in his employ. Diana never exchanged words with any of these ruffians, keeping them in her memory as another thing to count against Uncle James' integrity. *Though there was something ... strangely familiar about that man*, she mused, worrying at the half-formed impression as if it were a sore.

Putting the man out of her mind, Diana continued to stride towards the stairs. *I've been on this damnable walk. If Uncle James wants anything more of me, he will have to batter down my door and—*

"Hello?"

Diana jumped in surprise at the sound. Pausing in her advance towards the stairs, she was dismayed to see the green-eyed man standing but a few paces behind her in the corridor. Now that he was illuminated by the sunlight flooding through the windows, Diana could see that he looked most dissimilar from the ruffians with whom Uncle James usually met.

He was younger than she had first thought, for one, with an appealingly wide chin and prominent cheekbones. Though his chestnut-coloured locks were long and untidy, it was nevertheless a handsome head of hair. From his visible arm muscles to his thick, athletic legs, the young man appeared to be the very picture of masculine English health.

However, she found herself unsettled by the man's casual state of dress, standing before her in his shirtsleeves, hands in his pockets, and cravat loose around his neck. Most unnerving of all was the man's bearing—his easy confidence and smug, bemused smile tweaked something within her, provoking a strange sensation of nervous energy Diana could not remember having felt before.

Before she could speak a word in defence or protest—she had not decided which tone was proper to take—the man opened his mouth, revealing glittering white teeth.

“I admit, my grasp of manners has not always been exemplary,” he said with a wry edge in his voice, “but I believe it’s still the fashion in this country to knock before entering a man’s family home.”

Irrked, Diana replied more quickly than she could think, “I cannot speak to the history of your manners, sir. But as you appear to be unaware, it is considered quite impolite to lurk in doorways and stare at young women. In this country and all others I have known.” Diana folded her arms, hoping to look vaguely intimidating even as she steadied herself to keep from shaking in agitation at this confrontation.

Maddeningly, the man’s smile drew even more crooked, one end rising as though Diana had just uttered a witty bon mot. “In that case, I appreciate your lesson in comportment, My Lady. And how many countries have you known, then?” The man began ambling around the room, looking around the surroundings as though he had not a care in the world.

“I ... well ...” Diana spluttered over the sound of blood rushing in her ears, turning them frightfully hot. She had always longed to travel, though she had not had the opportunity to go farther afield than the occasional childhood visit to the English seaside.

He shrugged. “Forgive the question; it was only idle curiosity. I suppose it does not matter either way. The only rules that matter in a man’s house are his own, I have always thought.”

His *house!* Diana thought, feeling her cheeks colour with irritation. *Who is this impertinent scamp?* “I don’t know who you are, sir, or—”

“That much is evident already, thank you,” he interrupted her.

“But whatever land you may think yourself in at the moment, in actuality, this is the home of Sir James Leeson, a man as important and wealthy as he is short-tempered. And unless he is expecting you on business, perhaps it would be prudent for you to go back to wherever you came from before you are asked to leave in rather more impolite terms!” Diana smirked, a rush of pride swelling in her chest at her facility in dismissing this stranger.

But the man only turned on his heel away from the painting he had been examining and fixed Diana with a glittering smile, one more borne of humour than derision for the first time. “So you are not lost after all, then! And by the sound of it, you have had the pleasure of getting to know my stepfather personally.”

“For your information, I am—” She stopped, unable to prevent herself from drawing in a gasp. *Stepfather? But that would mean ...*

Diana’s heart sank in her chest as years of memories flooded through her in an instant. She saw her mother sitting in her favourite chair by the fire, walking with her in the gardens, riding in a coach on a rainy day. She heard her mother’s voice carrying on about a stepson of Uncle James, expressing a wish that Diana and he could meet someday, that they would get along very well.

Diana blinked, realised her mouth was hanging agape and snapped it shut. Trying to ignore the twisting ache in her stomach and the

brilliant red her cheeks must have turned, she drew herself straight with whatever meagre dignity she could muster. "Mister Colin Leeson, then, I take it?"

Colin's smile flickered—for an instant, it looked as though he were truly in pain. Then his arrogant manner returned to him, and he bowed slightly in almost a mockery of the gesture. "Mullens, actually. My mother abandoned the name when she married my stepfather after my birth father passed away, but I have not been so ... blessed, I'm afraid."

Colin's eyes roved across Diana slowly, taking her in from head to toe as though devouring a roast chicken. Though Diana felt strangely exposed by this examination, she resisted the urge to cover herself or flee, instead standing firm in a haughty posture. Even more vexing, he waited until she opened her mouth to ask a question to jump in with an answer.

"I have been away for the last two months, travelling with friends. If my stepfather has written me with any news of these weeks, I have not received it," said Colin, drawing himself straight and examining his nails. He glanced at her again, his eyes cutting like a razor. "Charity is not chief among Sir James' positive attributes, nor is entertaining lovely young houseguests on a whim. And from your dress, I would not offend by implying you are newly employed in the household staff. Loath though I am to admit it, you have confounded me, My Lady. So I have no recourse but to put your own questions back to you: who are you, and what the devil are you doing here?"

Of all the days for this arrogant, impudent jackal to cross my path...

Diana's reason told her there was no sense in growing angry with this haughty young man for his ignorance of her position. But she was too exhausted by grief to listen to reason now.

“Diana Hann. Daughter of William and Catherine Hann. The *late* William and Catherine Hann,” she growled, feeling her fingers clench into fists at her sides.

This seemed to put Colin ill at ease. Diana could see his eyes flicker as he pieced together the implications of each of these details, connecting his stepfather James to Diana’s mother, making their relationship one of cousins by law, though not by blood. Seeming to put real thought into his words, at last, the young man sucked in his lower lip in a positively sensual gesture.

Diana shook her head. *Where on earth did that thought come from?*

“Here now, Miss Hann, who’s this? A friend of yours?”

Diana’s head jerked around to see Gerard Dunn and Missus Fessler, finally finished with their conversation and standing on the carpet in the foyer.

“Hello there, sir,” said Gerard, extending a hand to Colin. “Gerard Dunn. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“No. You haven’t,” said Colin, walking away from Gerard towards the stairs. Not breaking his stride, he passed within a few inches of Diana, close enough for her to smell the air of musk and leather and dust on him. Colin gave her one last brief yet significant look as he disappeared up the staircase—she could not tell if it was meant to be apologetic, mistrustful, or something else she could not even begin to guess.

A son of Uncle James' ... even were he not a boor, this is a man I must watch with great care, Diana thought, her eyes narrowing. Even if Colin was not the man's son by blood, every ounce of sense she possessed told her this was a creature not to be trusted.

Chapter 3

For Good and All

“Colin, my lad! My God, it’s good to see you home in one piece,” roared the old man, rising from his chair and embracing his stepson with a hearty clap on the back.

Colin returned James’ gesture with a smile and a friendly hand on the shoulder. If his stepfather detected any of the reticence in Colin’s greeting as he had feared, he gave no sign of it. No, Colin realised with relief, it really was as though their previous argument had been completely forgotten in his absence, as he had hoped.

“Come here; let me have a look at you.” Colin stood with arms spread wide, inviting inspection. His stepfather *hmmmed* and *hmpghed* as he looked him over, rubbing a finger against his moustache thoughtfully. “Stand up straight, now, don’t slouch. Terrible habit.”

Apparently satisfied with the young man who stood before him, Sir James nodded in approval. Colin blew out a sigh of relief, gratified at this return to normal circumstances. Before long, the two were sitting around the low table by the window, laughing and filling glasses with a bottle of red wine.

“For God’s sake, why on Earth didn’t you send word you would be coming back today? I would have got your rooms ready for you—I shudder to think how Davenport has been letting them go to rot in your absence.”

“And deprive myself of the look on your face on seeing my return? Perish the thought,” Colin answered with a smile. He reached down and rubbed his sore leg with one hand, the day’s riding having been pleasant, if strenuous.

Sir James shook his head ruefully. “You’d scarcely believe how much everything in this blasted city has gone to hell. A man can scarcely find any peace in his own home anymore—it seems I’m now expected to do the work of my own servants in addition to taking care of actual pressing affairs.” James chuckled Colin’s arm with a rumbling laugh. “And, of course, your dear mother has been of little enough help with all that. But enough of mouldy old London. What of you? Tell me of your conquests in ... where did you end up with those wretched friends of yours? Spain after all, was it?”

It really is like nothing ever happened, isn’t it? thought Colin, sipping his wine with relief. He had scarcely swallowed when this relief curdled to trepidation of how long this armistice would last. *Sir James may put off a battle, but he never loses,* Colin reasoned with a sour taste in his mouth. *And he certainly never forgets to fight.*

For the better part of an hour, the two men talked and laughed over a bottle of wine—one better than the usual wine James shared with him, Colin realised with pleasant surprise. At some point, the conversation began to run dry, however.

Colin completed the brief list of suitable anecdotes he had curated to share with his stepfather, and Sir James, as ever, had much to say but volunteered little enough about his own life. Soon the room was blanketed with what might have been a companionable silence were it not for the worries that filled Colin’s head in the absence of the spoken word.

He still bears me some grudge, Colin could not help thinking, detecting disapproval in James' gaze lingering on his face or avoiding looking at him entirely. He felt his muscles tense, revisited by the familiar fear he had hoped to escape in his travels.

But each time the subjects of money or women came up in their conversation—which was often, given his stepfather's proclivities—Colin's heart wrenched with fear of that issue that was sure to be raised. The increasing delay in the topic's appearance made Colin ever more fearful.

I should never have run off, Colin thought glumly, anticipating his stepfather's likely criticism. *I should have faced my responsibilities like a man.* But try as Colin might to rise to what was expected of him, he simply could not abide the thought of being sent out to woo whichever wealthy dowager James had in mind for him to marry. *A dowry is a fine thing, and I do not begrudge Sir James his desire for one.*

And yet ... Colin had tried for years to rid himself of this longing within himself to give his heart to one he truly cared for. Sir James had long since thrown away the last silly romance novel in the house, decrying them as tiresome pap that turned young men's minds to mush. And Colin had tried to throw away his own ridiculous thoughts of love as well, chastising himself each time he felt lonely tears rise in him.

But this proved to be more difficult than he had hoped, and this desire to marry at his own freedom only grew keener each time Sir James brought up the matter. *But after all, it is I who must live with the woman and he who will take the lion's share of the dowry.*

At last, Colin remembered something that might serve to distract him from this useless fretting. "I did mean to ask you about something, Sir James," said the young man, looking into his glass of wine

thoughtfully. “Or *someone*, more specifically. Diana Hann.”

James Leeson sighed ruefully at the name. “Terrible business, that,” said Sir James mournfully. He drained the contents of his wine glass in one draught, and Colin could not help noticing how much older the man looked since he had truly examined his face.

“I saw Mother briefly before she retired to her room for a rest,” Colin explained. “She mentioned something about sending a letter explaining the situation. I’m afraid it didn’t find me. Miss Hann is living here, then, with us? What became of her parents, exactly?”

He refilled his glass, then set the bottle back on the table. With his eyes fixed on some faraway point beyond his bookshelves, Sir James spoke in a distant voice. “The news came all in a hurry, I’m afraid. I suppose it was ... three weeks ago, now. My sister Catherine and her husband William were off riding somewhere to the south of the city. God knows why. It seems their driver didn’t see a fallen tree branch in the road, and in a trice, the carriage was smashed to pieces, and all three were dead.”

James sniffed only once, his eyes dry. Colin felt his heart swell with sympathy for the man—he must have had a great deal of love for his sister, though Colin could scarcely remember the man saying anything about her. *Hardly surprising for such a private man, that*, he scolded himself.

“It was the next day when that dreadful Arnold fellow, Hann’s accountant or some such, came here to speak with me. He gave me the news about Catherine and William, then revealed that I was somehow the girl’s sole living relative. Making me, in the absence of a male heir or a will, Diana’s guardian and executor of her inheritance until such time as she marries.”

James burst out in derisive laughter at his own words, startling Colin. "Not that that will be any easy thing to accomplish." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "I tell you, Colin, the girl is a right she-cat. A complete virago. Never have I known such a fractious child, especially toward one's own family. I can only imagine what her parents went through raising her—I am left to assume proper child-rearing was wasted on her, or else poor Catherine was more out of her depth than I suspected."

"Yes, I had noticed Miss Hann has a certain ... choleric character." Colin chuckled. "As a matter of fact, she and I just ran into one another downstairs. I cannot say I have ever gone from making someone's acquaintance to being drawn into a bickering argument so quickly."

The great man waved a worn, wrinkled hand dismissively. "Don't let it trouble you, my boy. It won't be long until she's married and no longer our problem. That Dunn boy may be a buffoon, but he's eager enough to have her for his wife," said James, leaning back in his chair with fingers steeped thoughtfully.

Colin rubbed his chin ruefully, remembering the vicious expression on Diana's face as she looked at Gerard Dunn. The man was lucky the object of his affection lacked the power and vengefulness of her namesake, even if she might be nearly as pretty. "I hope you're right, Sir James," said Colin, swirling his wine around in his glass. "The young lady is full of spirit and does not seem overfull of fondness for Mister Dunn."

A palpable burst of cold passed through the air in James' study. "That will not be a problem. I tell you, it won't be long until she'll be out of our hair for good and all. Put it out of your mind." From the expression on James' face, it was clear this was meant as an order as much as reassurance. His moustache twitched at one side, and then

his face set in a stony scowl.

Colin could not miss the change that came over his stepfather at these words. He had grown accustomed to James' mood changing with such abruptness, though it was jarring every time it happened. It was as sudden and dramatic as blowing out a lamp: one moment James was smiling and laughing, the very picture of paternal affection, and the next he was ... well, like this.

Or worse, thought Colin, taking a sip of his wine and averting his gaze. Colin had always strived to please his stepfather, but that had not stopped Sir James from occasionally erupting into fits of wrath that kept Colin awake at night or transformed delicate household ornaments into jagged shards scattered across the floor.

A chill ran down Colin's spine at the thought of his most recent fracas with Sir James, the one just a few weeks before that had led to Colin leaving the city on a last-minute excursion to the continent. Colin could scarcely remember the name of the woman Sir James had decided was right for him to marry, the one he must approach at a ball and woo.

All he could remember was how furious he had felt, though he never once raised his voice to his beloved stepfather; it was like speaking to a stone, Colin had thought. James had listened so little to what he was saying. Eventually, his stepfather had progressed to one of his violent rages, and Colin had stalked off before James could destroy something irreplaceable in his fury.

These memories were washed away by an immediate surge of guilt. *For God's sake, Colin, why are you letting yourself get caught up in petty resentment again?* he said to himself, shaking his head. *The man only wants the best for you and the whole family, as ever. Damn his temperament; his behaviour is what matters, and that is the behaviour of a*

great man!

Colin swallowed, the guilt coalescing into a familiar knot in his throat. *After all, what would have become of Mother and me if he had not been willing to marry a poor widow?* James had never failed to sadly point out the misfortunates from the orphanage and the home for fallen women whenever they rode together in the streets of London. While he was certain James never intended such, Colin always understood the true message of these miscreants: *that would be you were it not for your kindly stepfather.*

Sir James has our best interests at heart. You know this. Stop fighting him on this issue and do your duty, as we all must do.

“... problem of Diana resolved to our satisfaction, it will be time to return to the matter of your bachelorhood, Colin. It’s long past time we find you a suitable bride so you can proceed with a family of your own. You agree, of course?”

Colin’s eyes fluttered, dragged back to the present. His stepfather was looking at him impatiently, arms folded and moustache aquiver.

“... Of course, Sir James. As you say,” Colin answered, trying to quiet the mournful cry he heard emanating from deep within himself.

James leaned forward with a grunt, patted Colin on the back heartily, then rose to his feet and chuckled. “Excellent. Now that all that business is settled, we can move on to pleasanter affairs. Take care of your important business *first*, Colin, before you entertain your idle fancies. Remember that, won’t you?”

“Yes, Sir James.”

“Good lad.”

Chapter 4

A Family Dinner

The Leeson family dining room was as elegant to Colin's eyes as the first time he had seen it—small surprise, as it was decorated and furnished exactly as it had been when Sir James Leeson had brought his bride Priscilla and her young son Colin into the house two decades earlier. The long, beautiful old oak table was polished to a fine sheen, reflecting the yellow constellation of the chandelier overhead, and the tall windows along the south wall suffused the elegant surroundings in the picturesque orange light of sunset.

The sheen of the table's surface was dulled only by the assembly of fine china and generous platters of food. Colin was pleased to see that, his stepfather's complaints notwithstanding, the repast looked as appetizing as ever: peas in the French style, a mountain of cauliflower in a velouté sauce, a massive joint of roast beef, and a collection of other delicious-smelling dishes. As soon as the last of the dishes was set before them on the table, Colin closed his eyes and happily inhaled the familiar smell.

Yet, for all the visual and comestible beauty that surrounded him, Colin could not help noticing the tense, uncomfortable pall that hung over the room. His eyes flitted from one chair to the next, puzzled by the acrimonious atmosphere that turned his pleasure at coming home to ash in his mouth.

Sir James had his eyes on his food, as was customary at mealtimes. If he was feeling anything other than his usual dry, stoic humour, he gave no sign of it. His mother, Priscilla appeared to be in her usual mood as well, Colin thought.

Though she was yet in her forties and had been blessed with a life of luxury since marrying Sir James, Colin could see that his mother was aged beyond her years, her long hair grown crinkled and iron-grey, her mouth flanked by thin lines from years of strife. *Father's death still weighs heavily on her, after all these years*, thought Colin grimly. *For her sake, I wish she could learn to be happy with our current circumstances instead.*

When his eye fell on Diana, the mystery of the room's atmosphere was solved instantly. This was only the second time Colin had clapped eyes on the pretty young woman, but it was immediately apparent that whatever contrariness she possessed in her character and had unleashed on him in the foyer, she set aside the largest portion of it for his stepfather. Though Diana only glanced in James' direction once or twice, and her face and bearing remained polite, the anger she bore him was clearly visible just behind her eyes.

Whatever could she be so angry with Sir James for? Colin wondered, so stricken by the young woman's ire that he did not even pick up his fork for a long moment. *Can she really be petty enough to begrudge him taking care of her very real need for a husband?*

Diana's eyes flitted to him, and he met her stony expression with an open scowl of his own. *It's not as though he caused her parents' demise, after all; she should show him some gratitude for taking her in rather than leaving her to meet her end on the streets. If she does not cultivate a better attitude, she will age herself harder and more quickly than Mother ...*

Regardless, the mood in the dining room went unacknowledged as Sir James tucked into his dinner, his wife and Colin following his lead even as Diana sat virtually motionless with hands folded in her lap. After several long minutes of silent ingestion, Sir James broke the silence by clearing his throat loudly.

Though he neither set down his cutlery nor ceased in his attack on his plate of beef, Colin recognised this gesture immediately as a call for the table's attention and set down his own knife to display more interest.

"So, Diana," said James in a nonchalant voice. "I trust you had a pleasant walk with our visitor, the young Mister Dunn?"

Colin felt his muscles clench at the question. *The girl is a powder keg, and Sir James simply prods it heedless of what explosion may follow ...*

Yet Diana's voice held nothing but sweetness as she replied, "Oh, yes, Uncle James, it was very lovely, thank you."

Seemingly surprised at this answer, Sir James looked up from his plate to see Diana smiling a manic grin in his direction. Before he could grumble his approval of this answer, she continued, just as sugary as before, "After all, Mother never let me have a puppy of my own. And Mister Dunn is very well trained, I must say."

Colin did not know whether to burst out laughing or gasp in shock. Instead of either one, he picked up his fork and looked down at his plate, hoping he could lose himself in his peas.

There was a loud clank from his stepfather's side of the table. "Bloody ingratitude," grumbled Sir James, his voice low and full of thunder. "These are the thanks I get for doing my duty as your guardian and finding you a suitable prospective husband?"

Diana rolled her eyes with vicious abandon. "I confess, it must be a terribly difficult task, finding eligible bachelors, Uncle. Especially when I am not allowed to leave this house. They do not seem to be all that common in this part of the world for some reason."

"And what is your suggestion, then?" asked Sir James, a threatening edge entering his voice. "That I turn you loose in the streets to ... to be propositioned by any lowborn ruffian who fancies you?"

"I realise it is a foreign concept to you, Uncle," said Diana through gritted teeth, "but there are places other than the boardroom where courtships may be begun. Balls, for example. Dances. Events in which young ladies are permitted to dance with a variety of gentlemen, who may be judged as acceptable by both the lady and her family before marriage is pursued."

Colin felt his eyebrow rise at this. *The girl has a point, at that. But then, Sir James must have some good reason for his haste.*

James' refusal was immediate. Shaking his head and helping himself to another serving of peas, he orated, "You speak of silly trivialities like what you read in those terrible romance novels. Life is not some storybook romance in which you will be swept off your feet by a dashing prince, Diana. Besides, it is too soon after the loss of your parents. It would not be appropriate for you to be seen at such public functions."

"But it *is* appropriate for my guardian to have me sold off like a common harlot to whichever man will give you the best price?" she snapped, incredulous.

James' moustache twitched in irritation. "Keep behaving like that, and you shan't see a prospect as good as Gerard Dunn again, mark my words."

Diana gasped as though terribly stricken by this idea. "I shan't? Oh, woe is me! Whatever will I do without my beloved Gerald or whatever? After all the trouble I went to in order to win the heart of someone so precious to me, who—"

"There it is, more sarcasm. I expect I should not be surprised by now. You had better not act like this at our dinner party tomorrow, or you'll wish you hadn't." James grunted in exasperation, digging into his plate of food as though trying to do it real bodily harm, then pulling out his fork to point it in Diana's direction. "I tell you, young lady, you wouldn't dare speak like that to me if you'd been raised in a proper household instead of being coddled like all you children are these days."

"Yes, if only my mother—your *sister*, Uncle James, as you seem to have forgotten—if only she had died years ago! Then you would certainly have raised me better; I have no doubt. How unfortunate she waited until I've been so thoroughly ruined to *die horribly*."

Ah, thought Colin, relieved at least that he had read the situation correctly. *There's the explosion.*

Sir James was out of his seat now, crashing his hands on the table with a terrible sound. "I don't know what you're implying, Diana, but I won't—"

"Oh, you don't?" Diana was standing now as well, her untouched plate rattling from the force of her shouting. "Then I'll make it plain for

you, Uncle: you're so eager to get rid of me that you don't give a damn that your sister is not even a month dead and buried."

James was not one to be overmatched for volume. Now raising his voice to shake the crystal in the chandelier, he replied with a face as red as the beef, "How *dare* you say such a nasty, hateful thing to your own blood, not to mention your legal guardian?"

Colin's eyes floated up to his mother to confirm that he was not merely imagining this dramatic battle unfolding before their eyes. He was dismayed, though by no means surprised, to see Priscilla looking on at the fracas dispassionately, her mouth small and tight between minuscule sips from her wine glass. *Has this become a routine occurrence in this house already, then? Or has Mother just grown that much more apathetic than I'd realised?*

"Wicked child! I knew I should have turned you over to a convent and given your inheritance away to the Church. Instead, like a fool, I welcomed you into my own home as if you were a treasured friend."

"If this is how you treat your friends, Uncle, it's small wonder you spend so much time alone in your study!"

"Here, now," said Colin, pushing back from his seat and extending his hands to calm the pair of them. "Miss Hann, I don't think there's any call for—"

But there was no stopping this altercation now. James' wine glass tipped over, spilling blood-red liquid over his side of the table, but he seemed not to notice as he leaned closer to Diana and shook a thick finger in her direction. "If you don't stop this ridiculous argument and sit back down right this instant, Diana, I swear to you, I'll—"

“You’ll what, Uncle? Keep me locked in my room? Marry me off to the first turnip-headed fool who’ll have me? Hah!” There was a strange smile on her face, though her eyes were red-streaked with tears. “You’ve already tried that. Come on, we both know you’re wickedder than that. Why not try a little creativity with your threats instead?”

Once again, Colin felt himself need to stifle laughter despite the seriousness of the situation. *These are horrid things to say to such a good, upstanding man*, he reminded himself, trying to erase what was threatening to become an admiring smile at Diana. Yet as unreasonable as she was being, he could not deny that it took true courage to confront a powerful man like James Leeson. He had certainly had the occasional impulse to struggle against his stepfather’s firm parentage throughout his childhood but had never summoned the bravery to do so.

And the way Diana’s eyes flashed with such life, her red-blond curls shook and tossed in the air ...

Still the battle raged on. “After all I have done for you to make you welcome here, Diana, and still you heap this abuse on your own uncle —”

“It’ll have to be the thumbscrews next if you really want to teach me a lesson.”

“To think what your mother would say if she could see you acting like this ...”

“There must be an iron maiden somewhere about this house. Of course, if you don’t want to go to the trouble of procuring such, I imagine a simple flogging should correct my behaviour to your satisfaction.”

“Enough!”

The air was filled with a colossal crashing sound as James swept his dishes onto the floor, transforming them into glittering porcelain shards mixed with half-eaten beef. Diana’s mouth snapped shut; her chin still lifted high in defiance. Colin closed his eyes for a moment, trying to remember whether that had been the last remaining pieces of dishware his mother had brought into the house while simultaneously chiding himself for caring at all.

Sir James sat back in his chair with a heavy thump, a resolute expression on his face though Colin could still see the storm raging behind his quiet façade. In a low voice, James spoke, the words like daggers flung onto the table between them, “I’ll brook no further words from you on the subject. You will be married, Diana, and soon. If not to Gerard Dunn, whether through your own refusal or your barbarity driving him away, then to the first brute on the street who passes by the window.” With nothing more to be said, James reached out to refill his wine glass and calmly sipped from it.

Colin could not keep his eyes from darting to Diana in anticipation. But it seemed his stepfather’s final words had broken the spell. Diana angrily wiped away her tears, casting one last red-hot look of hatred at Sir James, then turned and fled from the dining room, knocking over her chair in her haste to leave.

“Bloody nuisance. I tell you, it’s a crime that a man can’t even have a peaceable meal in his own bloody house,” Sir James grumbled. He snapped for one of the nearby servants to fetch him a new plate, then

refilled this from the serving dishes and turned his attack back to the beef.

Priscilla gave a soft, stifled sigh as she peered at the servants who had silently appeared to clean up the wreckage of dishware on the floor beside James. The change in her already dour facial expression was barely perceptible, but it pulled hard on something close to Colin's heart. He followed her eyes to the door through which Diana had escaped, then she sighed again and took another bite of her peas without a word.

* * *

The solemn silence of the little bedroom was split by a low, insistent gurgle that progressed into a veritable roar.

Diana sighed and gave her stomach a grim pat of reassurance. "Come on, now, it's not so bad as that," she said softly. "We had tea and cakes just this afternoon, after all."

And one missed meal is certainly a fair price to escape Uncle James' ranting, thought Diana. Her stomach audibly registered its disagreement with this sentiment, and she turned over on her side in hopes of quieting this insistent petitioner.

Maybe I should just go along with his plans. Diana shut her eyes tightly, gritting her teeth hard enough to give her a headache. *Whatever else he may be, he does not seem to be a stupid man—it's possible he knows more than I on this subject. After all, marrying may turn out to be my only escape from this horrid house unless the law suddenly changes its mind and decides to let an unmarried woman inherit. Besides, going along with Uncle James seems to be good enough for that cretinous stepson of his.*

The thought of Colin twisted Diana's expression to an even sterner scowl. *I knew I was right to assume the worst of him from the moment I saw him. No good can come of someone that flippant, to say nothing of anyone that well-dressed or handsome. Not that I would bother to notice such—*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden, sharp sound in her left ear. It was quiet, wooden, almost furtive.

Was that a knock? Diana glanced at the clock and saw it was nearly midnight. No one had paid her a late-night visit in her room since her arrival three weeks earlier, and she felt herself tense with anticipation at the mystery of who might be doing so now. *It's a good thing my stomach finally rested silently for a moment then, else I would not have heard it.*

Diana sat bolt upright in bed and stalked to the door on bare feet. There was no movement visible under the door, though she thought she saw a shadow that had not been there before.

"Hello?" Diana asked softly, her voice shaking. No answer.

Pressing her ear to the wood, she heard quiet, distant thumps as though someone were running without shoes down the corridor. Biting her lip in concentration, Diana quickly slid the door open and peeked her head out.

The long corridor that stretched the length of the entire second floor of the Leeson house was dark, the lamps presumably having been

extinguished by the staff hours ago.

Was that ... Aunt Priscilla? Diana wondered, perplexed. She thought another moment and realised she had definitely seen the older woman wearing such a garment around their home once or twice.

As she moved to take a step out into the hall to explore the odd situation a bit further, Diana stopped before she crushed an unfamiliar shape beneath her feet. Looking down, her face split in a girlish smile. There, left outside her bedroom door, was a small wooden tray bearing a covered plate. Diana pulled aside the cover to reveal a generous portion of roast beef and cauliflower. The smell that entered her nose with her quiet breaths was positively rapturous, provoking a growl from her impatient stomach.

I had not thought you capable of such a gesture, Aunt Priscilla, Diana mused. *To be truthful, I had not thought much of you at all. Clearly, I owe you an apology for underestimating you.* She prayed she would remember to thank her aunt for the gesture, then realised with a smile that she would never be able to forget this minor but much-needed kindness.

Diana picked up the tray and cast one last curious look down the empty hallway before hurriedly closing herself back up in her bedroom.

Chapter 5

Breaking Fast

“William! Oh God, William!”

Broken glass tumbled through the air like rain, shards scattering on the cobblestones one by one in a silent, deathly procession. A dozen—no, a hundred spectral steeds shattered against the stone, their final horrified breaths hanging in the air like ghosts. Somewhere fingers reached out for help and, finding no salvation in the bloody mist, relaxed into death.

And when the monstrous wood-and-steel hulk finally, agonisingly came to a shuddering stop, collapsing into a pile of splinters on the cold ground, there was only one more sound amid the ghastly silence.

“Diana ...”

“Mother!” Diana screamed.

The instant her eyes opened, Diana’s recurring nightmare was replaced by a waking one, her mind immediately filled with mournful thoughts of her mother and father, then anger towards money-grubbing Uncle James, irritation at that dolt Gerard Dunn and that strange Colin Mullens, with his tongue like a poisoned barb and his eagerness to please his damnable stepfather.

She took in a shaky breath, grasping the blankets for purchase to keep herself from fainting, overwhelmed by all that lay in wait for her. *The whole world is hungry to marry me away, to abuse me, to shut me up or bury me in my grave and be done with it*, Diana thought, laying her head back down on the downy pillow. *How many years of this sort of treatment must I suffer through until my misery is ended? How much punishment does this life have in store for me?*

She choked out another weak breath, hot tears filling her eyes. *It would have been better if I had been in that carriage with them, that I might have died the carriage wreck as well.*

But then, with that one simple thought, something changed within her. As she lowered into the deep, despairing well within herself, what came back up was not misery but righteous determination. Her chin set, teeth clenched, limbs suddenly charged with energy and strength as she had not known in weeks.

“No,” she said aloud in a voice full of resolution, her words echoing softly from the corners of the little bedroom. “No more grieving, no wallowing. No more of that. I can live like this no longer. I will not allow myself to be treated as a prisoner.”

Diana rose purposefully from her bed and began to dress herself. She had escaped the tomb she had dug for herself and was eager to live once more.

Easy enough to say, foolish girl, but what recourse is even left to you save to endure your imprisonment? said a dismal voice in her mind. *All the determination in the world will not change the fact that Uncle James is your lawful guardian, and he will only allow you so much—less than he has if you continue to thrash about as you have been.*

Diana considered the matter carefully as she brushed her hair and washed her face. *I could apologise, I suppose?* she thought. *Play the good, dutiful niece, swear to follow Uncle James' orders with the utmost obedience, win his favour, and possibly be granted additional privileges? Perhaps I may even be allowed some measure of choice in selecting my own suitors.*

She caught sight of her reflection in the mirror at this idea and was immediately stricken by the look of revulsion that shot across her face. *No, not that. Even if I had a talent for deception, I do not think I could stomach a farce like that for more than a single sentence. Then what?*

As an unmarried woman, she was only allowed minimal movement on her own, virtually none outside the bounds of the Leeson grounds unless she was chaperoned, and Uncle James was unlikely to acquiesce to much of anything after she had spoken to him so roughly. *That early encounter in which Uncle James chased me back to my room notwithstanding, I may as well take full measure of my prison—the grounds really are fairly lovely. Sunlight and fresh air might be a tonic at this point.*

And I suppose I am not completely without allies, even shut up in this house, Diana reasoned. *Even if I am all but barred from leaving, I may be able to find some way to summon them to visit me here. I am a resourceful girl ... at least, that was what Mother used to tell me.*

By the time she was clean and dressed in an attractively sheer gown of pale red, Diana had seized on a plan that seemed satisfactory, if only for today. It was yet early in the morning, so she could be reasonably sure she could slip out of her room without being bothered by the staff or any other occupant of the immense house. Evading her mandatory breakfast with Uncle James, she would instead take a nice walk around the grounds, perhaps read a book outside.

She might even see if she could persuade Missus Fessler to send a note to her best friend Leah Reid, inviting her for a visit. Uncle James might have something to say about that, she thought ruefully, but if she were lucky, she could pass at least an hour or two in the gardens with Leah before he noticed and sent her away.

Diana took another look at herself in the tall, ornate mirror that hung on the wall. She already looked much improved since the day before: her pale cheeks had regained a modicum of their rosy hue, and now that she had taken the time to wrestle her red-gold curls into some semblance of order for the first time in weeks, she decided she looked halfway presentable. *There. Not so much like a corpse anymore. The necessary first step for actually living again, I suppose.*

But Diana was interrupted before she could spring into action by a furious protest in the form of a wordless gurgle. Diana looked over at the empty dishes of her dinner, then down at her stomach with dismay. “How on Earth can you still be hungry after the food Aunt Priscilla brought last night?” she asked in consternation.

Again, the plaintive organ made its dissatisfaction known, and Diana had no choice but to interrupt her day’s plans before they had even started, shaking her head in frustration. Opening the door as silently as possible, Diana peered out into the corridor.

The long hallway looked like a very different place in the golden early-morning sunlight that streaked through the windows. Activity echoed from somewhere deep in the bowels of the house, though Diana could see all the doors in her line of sight were still closed, including the grand portal at the end of the hall. Deducing that the staff had awoken to begin their day’s duties, but her wicked guardian still slept, Diana crept out into the world, closing the door softly behind her.

Her skin tingled with electric anticipation as she tiptoed to the stairs, then breathlessly slid down them in her soft leather shoes. She paused before reaching the first floor, detecting some movement out of the corner of her eye. After a few seconds of holding her breath, she realised she was merely catching sight of a young family of starlings saluting the day from their nest outside one of the windows.

Diana could not stop herself from grinning in pride at her adventure. She felt like a child doing something that was not allowed, and for the first time in ages, all her problems seemed to evaporate, leaving her feeling like she weighed no more than a feather. Stifling a giggle, Diana stole into the main corridor that led to the dining room, past which she was reasonably certain she would find the kitchens.

By now, Missus Fessler should be there starting her day with George, she reasoned, tongue peeking out of her mouth in concentration. I'm sure I can persuade them to let me secret away some bread and a handful of strawberries. Then I should be able to get into the library and pick out a book to read in the garden before anyone realises I'm—

She stopped, frozen like a statue by the sight before her. There, beyond platters piled high with more food than Diana usually saw on the familiar table, the shape at the side of the table was a familiar one seated at the far end. Her heart pounded in her chest as she thought for an instant it was Uncle James, lying in ambush for her, and her fear did not lessen appreciably when she recognized Colin Mullens' loose, dark curls and imperious smile.

His eyes were already on her, and on his lips was a smirk of recognition of having caught her in the act. *Drat it!* she thought, fearing her plans had already been spoiled. *Now I suppose he will alert his father to my movements, perhaps have the household follow me to make sure I do not run off or do something similarly daft.*

For a long while, the figure simply looked at her, his eyes roving up and down her lithe form. Hoping she was not shaking visibly with nervous energy, Diana stood firm, refusing to blush or bolt in response to this inspection. As Colin gazed at her, she stared right back at him, her eyes picking apart his affectedly casual posture and half-empty plate of food before him.

Eventually, Colin nodded his head gently towards the chair opposite him. And though most every part of her told her to flee, to run off into the gardens or beyond the bounds of the home that had become her prison ...Diana yielded, walking cautiously to the chair and sitting. Hoping whichever lone voice within her had compelled her to take this invitation was her good sense, she wordlessly helped herself to a hunk of bread and a hard-boiled egg and began eating.

* * *

It took Colin a long while to get over the shock at Diana's appearance at the table. He had half-assumed she would stay in her room, too angry with his stepfather or too fearful of his wrath to dare set foot out her door—if she hadn't run off in the night, that is. Realising she was content to eat in silence, he continued to work on his own breakfast, assuming eventually she would grow weary of the quiet.

Finally, after five aching minutes, he could take the silence no longer. "It's not often I have the opportunity to share my breakfast with another," Colin said abruptly.

Diana's eyes shot up to him from her plate, wide and charged with fear or anger or some mix of the two. She said nothing to him, instead only staring at him with her icy blue eyes.

Good Lord, Colin thought, it really is like dining with a wild animal or a savage who has never encountered civilisation. How extraordinary!

Colin gave her a reassuring smile, hoping it might disguise how funny he found her reaction, irritating though it otherwise might be. "In fact, I don't think there has been another early riser in this house besides me in ... well, ever," he continued jovially.

Still Diana only glared at him, speaking not a word in reply as she continued to devour her breakfast. He noted that her muscles were knotted, face flushed with ire, but despite her continued savage muteness, her table manners did demonstrate a young woman of practised breeding.

He shook his head, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. *Perhaps we can see just how far she intends to take this silent game,* Colin thought wryly. *Even if she does not intend to speak, that's no reason I have to have my breakfast in silence. Besides, if I annoy her sufficiently, she may have another outburst like she did last night, and that would be quite a sight!*

"I know you'll enjoy your time in our home," said Colin with as much casualness as he could muster. "If Missus Fessler has not already driven you screaming out into the street with her chatter, you should find it most pleasant here."

Diana glanced up at him, her pale blue eyes alight with irritation. Then, without speaking a word, she turned her eyes back down to her breakfast, which she continued to consume with grim determination.

Colin smiled, immediately attracted by the challenge before him. *If*

anyone can get a rise out of this young lady, I know I can.

“Then again, I imagine a bit of chit-chat might be a welcome thing now and again. Though there are certainly conversation partners I would choose over good old Missus Fessler. Do you have any friends who have been to visit you here, perhaps?”

He waited for an answer to his question, taking a bite of his breakfast and tamping down a chuckle at her continued stubbornness. When no reply was forthcoming, Colin thought he might try a different tactic. “At least the weather is suitable for sitting and stewing indoors. Sir James told me yesterday was the first day without rain in nearly a month.”

And, “Mother and Sir James will be having a dinner party this evening, if you haven’t already been told. Good news for you, I imagine: more people to talk to, including some rather interesting friends of the family, and there’s less likely to be any destruction of property. The food will be much the same; I’m sorry to say.”

Then, after no more than a breath, “You would scarcely believe what passes for music at balls in Spain, even at the more reputable establishments. It’s all that wretched guitar music, still, if you can imagine dancing to such a thing.”

On and on, Colin talked, giving voice to every stray thought that entered his head. He kept the one-sided conversation carefully away from any subject that might provoke Diana into another rage, speaking instead of light-hearted small talk about the weather, theatre, fashions in Spain, and every other trivial matter he could think of. He loosed his wit from the usual tight leash he kept it on while in his stepfather’s house, making cunning jokes and observations about each subject as they occurred to him.

The young woman opposite him seemed to hear all, her eyes darting to him every so often. Yet still, she gave no reply, keeping her mouth occupied solely with nourishment. The longer Colin spoke, the funnier he found this reaction—it was like conversing with a statue, somehow, or like a beautiful trained bird who was fully capable of speech yet would not deign to converse with him in particular for some reason.

Throughout the meal, he strained to keep a pleasant smile on his face even as he held in his laughter at the preposterousness of the situation lest Diana take real offense and flee; this grew increasingly difficult as the joke dragged on, needless to say, and Colin could feel a trickle of sweat run down his neck at the effort.

By the time Diana had finished her food, it felt to Colin that he had been talking for ages, though as he glanced at the clock in the corner, he saw that it had only been ten minutes. Rising silently from her chair like a ghost, Diana moved to leave the room to pursue whatever activities Sir James allowed to her.

“I trust your food was to your satisfaction?” Colin said in a loud, clear voice. This had the desired effect of halting Diana in her egress, and she turned sharply to glare at him once more. Unable to resist one last tweak that might compel a reaction of some kind, he continued with a smile, “Though obviously it was nothing compared to the quality of the conversation.”

Diana’s smouldering gaze seemed to rise a degree or two in response to these words; other than this, she gave no visible reaction at all. Indeed, after a heartbeat or two of waiting, she turned on her heel and strode from the dining room without looking back. She had not spoken a single word since entering fifteen long minutes before.

Colin dabbed his mouth with his napkin, hoping to hide the sound of the laughter that he was at last unable to hold in any longer. When he was sure the strange, peevish young Diana was out of hearing—an easy task, as she stomped her feet and slammed doors loudly enough that everyone in the house was surely aware of her location—he finally gave in and erupted in laughter that shook his belly.

I'm thankful I made it back here from Spain when I did, Colin thought, wiping away a tear and pushing back from the table. *To think that I missed the last three weeks of sport like this!* Indeed, between this savage breakfast and the colourful invectives she had hurled at Sir James last night, Colin could not remember the last time there had been such vivacity in the Leeson house.

Although ... he mused with a minor stirring of guilt in his breast. As ridiculous as her behaviour is, it is clear that Diana is truly upset by something. Colin rubbed his chin in thought. *It certainly makes sense to be put out by being pushed to marry against one's will—I should know that better than anyone.*

Yet for all her dramatic protestations, James Leeson was no tyrant, of that he was sure, and would never do anything to genuinely harm a child in his care; besides, such things were different for well-born women than for men, he knew.

She must still just be in the throes of grief over her mother and father. Colin's mind traced the precious few memories of his own father that had not yet receded into the mists of oblivion. He had been only a small boy when his father had died, and the memories that remained were crude yet delicate as spun glass. Christmas mornings, sunny afternoons beneath a shady tree, the feeling of his father's whiskers scratching his face as they embraced. Mostly he remembered the fear and terrible, crushing sadness as he and his mother had mourned the man's sudden passing.

Again something tugged at Colin's heart, reflecting on how terrible such pain must be for a grown woman, especially losing two loving parents at the same time. *Hard as it is to resist tweaking the nose of a creature who reacts to it with such uproar, I really should be a bit gentler with Diana. For now, at least. She deserves that much.* He rose from the table, suddenly eager to leave the scene of this encounter.

Then he sniffed, suddenly detecting something amiss. Hanging in the air was the faintest trace of a smell of unfamiliar flowers. The odour kindled some memory hidden still deeper in the recesses of Colin's mind—something beyond concrete form or words. All he knew was that something about the smell made him feel unbearably sad.

Before he left the dining room, he cast one last look towards Diana's empty chair. Apart from that strange, compelling smell, there was a palpable crackle of energy left behind in her wake, Colin sensed, something that stirred in him a sensation he could not quite define. Whatever it was, it was enlivening, provoking him to feel more alert and less discontent than he had ever remembered feeling in his life.

Colin shook his head, half in amusement and half in confusion. However terrible the circumstances that had led her to stay at the Leeson house, he could not deny that he was grateful for the presence of this energy that seemed to follow Diana like a shadow ... and for her presence as well, in a ridiculous kind of way.

Chapter 6

A World Beyond the Walls

On this morning, the weather was not so different than the previous afternoon. Improbably, for a second day in a row, the sun was shining down merry and bright upon the suburban London enclave in which the Leeson house was situated.

Diana closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath through her nose, savouring the sensation of the cool sweetness in her lungs. The air around her was thick with birdsong, the sky of purest blue overhead populated by puffy clouds that resembled nothing so much as minuscule sugary confections.

A gentle breeze stirred the mosaic of green leaves on the elm and hawthorn trees that flanked the edges of the Leeson garden, casting blessedly cool shade upon the garden path that snaked between a hundred carefully cultivated tulips, daisies, and, of course, columbines as lovely as they were poisonous. She fairly flew down the meticulously kept path, inspecting the sights and smells of Nature's beauty even as the air filled her to bursting with vibrant, unapologetic life.

As Diana roamed the garden, keeping the house to her back at all times, she thought to herself, *How absolutely splendid it is out here! Since arriving I cannot ever remember feeling this ...* She stopped, suddenly unsure of herself. *I do not know if 'happy' is the right word, somehow.* It felt wrong to feel that way, somehow, as though she were betraying her mother and father by abandoning her grief even for a moment. Then a gust of wind tousled the greenery all around her, and Diana burst into giggles as the air filled with a hundred gossamer dandelion clocks.

Look at them all! Diana thought in wonderment, trying to catch some of the ghostly white travellers in her fingers. Tears scattered from her eyes in her joyful laughter, suffused with half-remembered impressions of having chased dandelions with her mother on some idyllic summer afternoon in her childhood. *Christopher must have missed these beauties in all his meticulous grounds keeping*, she reflected, and felt a rush of gratitude for the man's inattentiveness in his weeding duties. *Or else he allowed a few to grow discreetly, where Uncle James would not see them. He would surely have them pulled out, no matter how pretty they are.*

Diana sighed, her arms falling to her sides as all the bliss that had suspended her on the winds left her body. For all the splendour of the flowers of English summer and the beautiful sights and sounds that surrounded her, she could not avoid the fact that she was still a victim of tragic circumstance. She was committed to live her life rather than allow herself to be entombed in a grave of her own digging ... but what kind of life was left to her?

She turned around in place, drinking in her surroundings. *Not one in a hundred Londoners is fortunate enough to be able to enjoy such natural beauty—in a thousand, even.* But inexorably, at the edge of her vision, Diana could not help seeing the tall stone walls that outlined the estate's grounds. Tipped with decorative wrought iron spikes, she wondered to what degree they were meant to keep people in rather than out. And behind her, at the end of her twirl, was the grim grey hulk that belonged to her captor James Leeson.

This may be a pleasant prison, but I am no less a prisoner, thought Diana, feeling her cheeks redden in consternation. Over those walls were all the wonders and terrors of the world, but as close as it was, it did not matter how much wealth was assigned to her name in a ledger in Jerome Arnold's study somewhere; her fate was in the hands of Uncle James, for good or ill.

Hands folded behind her back, she resumed walking the winding garden path, her mind running over the events that had brought her to this beautiful yet isolated place.

I can scarcely remember even meeting Uncle James before coming here, Diana thought, the scenery that surrounded her disappearing behind the grim pall that now hung over her once again. But whatever memories I do have of him before this time, I recall nothing that would suggest such cruelty and callousness in the man.

She sat heavily on a low stone bench, folding her legs beneath her and allowing her arms to collapse limply into her lap. She gazed off towards the distant wall at the back of the grounds, watching the parade of little white clouds sail across the horizon, freer than she would ever be. Apart from a strange, ugly black tree squatting on a hillock below, the garden was as pristine and verdant as any landscape painting she had ever seen.

Diana cast her mind through her memories of her mother, searching for any mention she might have made of her brother's parsimonious nature. Recalling nothing of the sort, her mind began to linger instead upon other, more pleasant images. She closed her eyes, wrapping herself in the comfort of days gone by.

I remember the lunch I had with Mother and Father in some garden or another very far from our home. They were so much bigger than me, then—that is, I was so small, I suppose. I thought we had walked for miles and miles to find just the right spot to eat, though surely it was only a little way after we exited the carriage. I cannot ever remember eating anything so delicious and refreshing as those blackberries Father helped me pick from the bushes.

I remember the summer when Mother took Leah and me to the seaside. The water was so wretchedly cold, and it took Mother half an hour to coax me into the surf! Then when she finally did, I could not be persuaded to leave. I was having such a good time frolicking with my friend. Mother was so patient with both of us, letting us swim and play nearly until nightfall.

I remember being lifted onto the back of my pony Athena for the very first time. The air was so warm and wet and full of straw—I would not stop complaining about the smell, little brat that I was. I was nine, then ... or was it ten? I was certainly old enough to mount Athena by myself, but I wanted Father to lift me instead, sensing on some level that I would not remain so portable for much longer. Father was so gentle with me, as though he were afraid I might break if handled too roughly.

She was tugged back to her place in the sunshine by the sensation of something wet brushing against her forearm. Diana's breath caught in her throat, her body shaking as she realised she was crying.

Mother, Father ... she thought, swiping away tears with the back of her hand. *Good God, I did not know it was possible to miss someone this terribly.* Idly she wondered if anyone had ever died from missing another person too badly.

A distant muffled sound from over her shoulder drew Diana abruptly back into the present. She turned her head to see the same rear façade of the same hateful house she had nearly forgotten in her reverie. It sounded as though a door was slammed somewhere in the estate. *Probably Uncle James having another one of his fits of temper,* she thought, her mournful tears transforming into ones of resentment and rage.

Whether Uncle James was always this horrid or has grown worse over the years, it makes no difference, Diana reasoned. *He means to force me to bend to his will at any cost.* From somewhere overhead, she heard the

angry call of a black crow—an ill omen, to be sure, and one that suited her dark mood.

A question bubbled to the top of Diana's consciousness, one she had pondered a thousand times before: *Why? Why is he so intent on compelling me to do as he says? What harm is there in allowing me to live my life free of his orders, if only for a little while? I do not want for anything but the time to grieve and the freedom to choose my own husband when I am ready to do so. Whatever could be his reason?*

The answer was as immediate as it was infuriating. Diana did not have to wonder about Uncle James' motivation; she knew it well enough already. *Money.*

She snorted, feeling her fingers clench into fists. *The man seems downright mad about all things financial.* The few times James had spoken to her about anything other than the necessity for her to marry, ideally this Gerard Dunn fellow, he'd riddled her with questions about her parents' finances. How his father had invested their fortune, whether there was some log or account kept out of sight of his friend Jerome Arnold, whether Diana's mother had had any other jewellery that might have been out for cleaning or stolen by the staff.

The first time Diana had been questioned in this fashion she had dissolved into an incoherent cloud of tears, and Uncle James dismissed her wrathfully ... but that had not stopped him from asking her the same questions again, and again, angered nearly as much by the true answers she was eventually able to supply.

Once again, Diana turned to look at the Leeson house. Her eyes narrowed as she took in all the ornate details of the mammoth home, the expense that had clearly been invested in the garden and the buildings. All to make it look as though James Leeson were a rich and

important man. How much more money could one man possibly need for himself that an uncle would steal from his niece with such abandon?

I'm not stupid, no matter what Uncle James might think. Whatever money her parents had left her, it was clear he meant to keep all of it for himself. And as her guardian, he had access to all of it. Everything Father worked for, all the money Mother received from her own parents ... Uncle James could be taking all of it now to line his own damnable pockets.

I have no doubt that the instant he is successful in marrying me off at a bargain, I shall never see a penny of my inheritance for the rest of my life. It will all be squandered on Uncle James' appetites or else handed down to that revolting stepson of his ...

Suddenly noticing she was wrinkling her skirt by clutching it tightly between her fingers, Diana loosened her grip and smoothed out her garment delicately. She rose, too angry to remain stationary any longer.

Clarity returned to Diana with this movement, so she increased her pace, striding quickly up and down the curves in the path as her skirt flapped dramatically behind her. *I suppose Colin might not be as bad as all that, actually*, she mused grudgingly. Indeed, not for the first time, she realised she did not know what to think about the odd dark-haired young man.

He was not unhandsome, in his own way; Diana had never seen eyes so deep and green, as though he were a fairy spirit from the forest. As irritating as she had found his banter when they had first met, Diana could not deny that Colin had as sharp a tongue as any man she had ever sparred with. And the expression on his face while she was so vociferously deriding Uncle James at dinner ... for a moment, it

almost looked as though he was going to speak up in her favour.

No, that's not right, Diana thought, a scowl returning to her features. He was intervening to stop me from arguing with his stepfather. Even if they share no more blood than Colin does with me, the fact remains that he was raised by Uncle James. That seemed as sure a sign the young man was rotten to the core as any Diana could imagine. Colin must be as terrible as James himself. In all likelihood, he is a collaborator in the man's plan to sell me off and take my inheritance for himself.

Diana looked up at the sky, seeing that clouds were rolling in with the wind and moving to blot out the sun. The breeze had grown stronger since she had come outside, and all of a sudden, it felt quite cold there in the darkening garden. A gust of wind cut through her light summer dress, shaking her bones and giving rise to gooseflesh on her arms and legs.

Good, thought Diana with an amused tilt of her head. Feeling cold means I'm not dead, not like Mother and Father ... not yet. I'm alive—wonderfully, fantastically alive. And not a weak little girl, but a strong young woman. And woe betide the man who ignores the fury of a woman scorned.

A devilish smile came to Diana's lips as she turned back to look at the looming Leeson house. *Well, if Uncle James and his spawn expect me to surrender and play along with their diabolical plans after just a harsh word or two, they do not know Diana Hann. I may not be able to defy the will of the entire English system of law, but I can make the life of a tyrant that much harder while there is still breath in my body.*

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the blood pumping through her veins with renewed vigour. Then she marched purposefully back towards the house.

No more mourning, no more sitting in bed and being depressed. It's time I take my life back, whether Uncle James likes it or not.

Chapter 7

Treacherous Ground

“Mullens, you bacon-faced bastard!” The words echoed through the entryway in a powerful voice full of laughter. “Do you honestly mean to tell me you were really allowed back onto Blighty’s sacred soil without being stopped and clapped in irons? Whatever has become of our kingdom?”

Colin turned away from his conversation with his mother to approach the redheaded young man who stood in the doorway, hat held in the crook of his arm. “Radcliffe,” he said with a warm smile, grabbing the other man’s hand and giving it a firm shake. “Thank blazes you’ve come. I was just worried we might have too much food for our own good tonight. I was telling Mother how badly we needed an ill-tempered Merry Andrew to come and eat us out of house and home in a hurry.”

“Only if you don’t serve it to me in a dog’s dish this time!”

At this, Adam Radcliffe and Colin Mullens laughed uproariously and clapped one another on the back heartily. As he detected a disapproving sniff from over his shoulder, though, Colin suddenly remembered where he was and quieted himself immediately. “Come on, Radcliffe. We’d better get a drink in you before unleashing you on Mother’s and Sir James’ other company.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’m told I’m much easier to take after a drink or two.”

Taking Adam by the shoulder, Colin walked quietly but decisively in the direction of one of the quieter salons on the ground floor. Irascible though his stepfather could be, the Leeson household was a common site for dinner parties and other events for their specific slice of London society—generally speaking, James Leeson attracted those middle-class social climbers who yearned to make their way into the top circles of the ton as well as members of the gentry who had fallen out of fashion or out of money in recent years.

As Colin had well learned over the past several years, this made for parties at which everyone was as ambitious as they were hungry, though their ambitions tended to manifest in what he found a particularly uninteresting way. Still, eager as ever to do his familiar duty as the stepson of the host, as Colin walked, he made sure to scan the room for any guests who needed to be greeted, directing a nearby servant to collect Lady Westermont's unseasonable cloak and hang it somewhere secure.

Adam was quick to pull Colin back into conversation with himself, as ever. Having somehow procured a glass of wine and finished it without leaving Colin's side, Adam poked his friend in the ribs with a finger to reclaim his attention. "I know you're dying to ask, Mullens, and yes, this hat is genuine beaver, and no, I can't tell you where I got it."

"Thinking of your friends, Radcliffe, as always."

"I count all of God's creatures as my friends, Mullens. Except the beaver, I suppose. Filthy beasts, you know."

As they walked, Colin could not help smiling at his lifelong friend Adam's continued inability to still his tongue. The two had been all

but inseparable since they were boys, and as they had grown into manhood, so too had their mischief. And as Adam had been one of their group of rowdy young bachelors who had not been able to attend Colin's recent excursion to Spain, Colin was bursting with colourful anecdotes of his exploits he had been looking forward to sharing with Adam for weeks.

He was just wondering whether there was any chance his stepfather had forgotten that Adam was responsible for defacing a beloved family portrait during the last dinner party Colin had invited him to when he noticed Adam had frozen mid-step.

"Magnificent. I say, Mullens," said Adam as if in a daze, tapping Colin on the shoulder. "You didn't tell me you'd brought a bird of paradise back from Spain with you."

Colin followed Adam's gaze and nearly burst out laughing when he saw the object of his friend's admiration. Just inside the salon with the rest of the dinner party guests, gamely making conversation with Lord Westermont, was Diana Hann. She looked quite lovely in her lilac-coloured gown and meticulously arranged golden hair, but even from here Colin could feel the familiar fire of anger burning bright within the young lady.

"Most generous of you to retrieve a souvenir of your travels for me," Adam quipped, straightening his tie. "I think I'll just go and sign my name on her for safekeeping, shall I?"

Colin caught his friend by the collar before he could make it more than a single pace in Diana's direction, rolling his eyes. "I think you need a bit of explanation more than a drink. Come on."

Adam shot him a hurt look. "If I don't need a drink, then there's no more need to raid your stepfather's wine cellar. Why not join the party straightaway?"

"Because *I* need a drink now."

With that, Colin led his reluctant friend down the corridor, away from the mingling dinner party guests in the grand salon of the household to a small study at the end of the hall. Withdrawing a snifter of brandy and a pair of glasses from the breakfront, Colin poured them each a generous serving, and they sat in the low chairs by the window. The friends raised their glasses to one another ... and that was as long as the peace lasted before being broken once more by Adam Radcliffe.

"I didn't realise they grew them like that in Spain," said Adam after slugging down half the glass in one mighty swallow. "She does speak English, though, doesn't she? Never mind, I'm sure we'll find a way to make ourselves understood. Or I will, at least. I'm a clever lad, they say."

"She's not from Spain, you dolt." Colin laughed, shaking his head at the absurdity of this sudden infatuation.

His friend shot him a look of exaggerated surprise. "You don't mean to tell me she's one of your conquests, then? And you've somehow kept her from me? I'm hurt at your mistrust, Mullens! It was a wise choice, of course, but it still smarts."

"She isn't *mine* either, Radcliffe. Not all of us are as single-minded as you."

“No one is as single-minded as me.” Adam smacked his lips thoughtfully. “Surely she isn’t one of your mother’s friends, then? Well, she wouldn’t be the first older woman I’ve wooed. And she is remarkably well preserved for a matron. I think I can summon the fortitude to—”

“Radcliffe, for God’s sake, listen to me!” Colin snapped, still chuckling. Adam set down his glass and assumed a posture of careful studiousness, fingers folded beneath his chin; the sight was ludicrous enough that Colin needed a moment to catch his breath and collect suitable words for the task.

“Her name is Diana Hann, Adam. Does that name mean anything to you, perchance?”

“Can’t say. Doesn’t sound nearly scandalous enough for me to have taken an interest. Hann, you say?” Colin nodded, and Adam rubbed his chin in thought. After a moment, he jumped to his feet, snapping his fingers in recognition. “I say, isn’t she that heiress to the rich man who was killed in a carriage accident?”

“That was her father,” said Colin, suddenly feeling the humour drained from the situation. “Her mother died in the same crash.”

“Why, that’s wonderful!”

Colin shot Adam a savage look.

“Don’t get me wrong, I mean that’s terrible, of course, my condolences

and all that. But Mullens, you mean to tell me she's not only beautiful and rich, but she's an orphan as well?" Adam barked with laughter. "Come on, old man, could you ever wish for a more promising prospect than that?"

"She's not precisely an orphan," said Colin, looking down into his glass of brandy. "She still has a living uncle who has been named her guardian—my stepfather, Sir James Leeson."

Adam's orange-coloured eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline at this. Colin gave a rueful smile and, seeing that he finally had his friend's attention, leaned forward and explained the whole scenario. Over a quarter of an hour, he gave every detail he could recall about Diana's history, Sir James' intentions for her, and how he expected things to proceed over the coming days.

He was surprised to find himself lingering so on recounting Diana's temper, with words like 'passion' and 'amazon' escaping his lips unironically. As he completed this soliloquy, Colin found himself growing louder and more animated, though he was unsure why he suddenly felt so anxious on behalf of this strange comely houseguest.

All the air seemed to come out of Adam as Colin spoke. Finally, he sat back down in his chair and took a dour sip of his brandy. "It all does sound a bit grim when you put it like that."

Colin blinked. "I ... suppose it does." For a moment, the two sat in silence in the library, with not a sound but the distant hubbub of the dinner party and the tick-tick-tick of an old grandfather clock.

But only for a moment. "Well," said Adam brightly, springing to his feet and striding towards the door. "It sounds as though your Miss

Hann is in need of not only a husband but something to buoy her spirits. Lucky for her that her cousin was unwise enough to invite Adam Radcliffe tonight.”

“She’s not my cousin,” Colin said sharply as he hastened to catch up with his friend. “But, ah, more to the point, Radcliffe, I really don’t think she’s in any mood for—”

“Stuff, Mullens. I’ve never met a girl whose mood can’t be improved by a chat with a handsome young swain like me.”

“Or you haven’t bothered to listen to any woman who’s felt different.”

“Precisely!”

Adam paced down the corridor towards the salon with great purpose, smoothing his hair with one hand as he walked. “I tell you, Radcliffe, you’re on treacherous ground here,” Colin protested.

“My preferred territory.”

“She’s a tiger and in no mood for nonsense.”

“She hasn’t tried *my* nonsense!”

Colin smiled and shook his head. His imagination supplied an image

of how the ferocious Diana Hann might greet the clumsy flirtations of his friend Radcliffe. *Unless ...* he thought, suddenly beset by a pang of trepidation. *There's no chance she would be fool enough to fall for his fast-talking and loutish wit. Is there?*

The grand Leeson salon was buzzing with polite conversation ... or as close to “buzzing” as such staid company ever was, Colin thought wryly. From his place by the doorway, he could see two dozen elegantly dressed guests, mostly older lords and ladies who had attended Leeson dinner parties on previous occasions. The guests had not yet progressed to the dining room for the meal and instead were sipping aperitifs and speaking gently with one another about the ton’s scandal du jour. Standing by the cold hearth wreathed by candelabra, Sir James Leeson was holding court with some of his favourites.

“Aha!” exclaimed Adam as he approached Diana, still trapped in conversation with the Westermonts. She regarded him warily, but he strutted in her direction like a peacock, his flaming red hair sticking out from his scalp at odd angles. Colin covered his mouth, praying he would not burst out laughing at an inopportune time.

“So, this must be the lovely Miss Hann. Adam Radcliffe,” said Adam, bowing deeply. He raised a hand as if to take Diana’s and kiss it in the continental fashion.

Seeing that she did not move to accept this gesture, he leaned forward instead and spoke to her in a conspiratorial stage whisper. “I assure you that whatever you have heard about me—whether from Mister Mullens or other disreputable characters—is all completely true.” An easy smile spread across his lips at this jest, and he punctuated it with a lightning-fast wink.

For a long, long while, Diana showed no expression at all. She neither moved nor spoke, instead just looking at Adam with a completely

blank face. Colin could see his friend sweating under this gaze from his distance several yards away, and out of the corner of his eye, he thought he detected other guests turn subtly from their conversations to watch this unfold.

At last, a flash of irritation crossed Diana's features—the sort of look one might have after noticing a large insect on the floor or treading on something foul in the street—and then she turned to excuse herself politely to nearby Priscilla Leeson and walked off to speak to someone else without so much as a word in Adam's direction.

The force required to hold back waves of laughter seemed to buffet Colin powerfully from the inside. Chest shaking, eyes freely flowing with tears, he coughed as he approached the deflated Adam Radcliffe and handed him a glass of wine retrieved from one of the servants.

“Mullens, why didn't you warn me?”

“I did, Radcliffe. I specifically said, ‘treacherous ground.’”

“You didn't say just how treacherous. Nary a word from her, yet I feel certain I'm lucky to be alive.” Still in a daze, Adam accepted the proffered glass in a limp hand. He glanced back in Diana's direction and loosed a sigh of admiration. “Still, how splendid must it be to perish in such a fashion!”

“Cheer up, old man. I've no doubt you'll find a manner of death all your own before too long.”

The two friends shared a weary laugh and retreated to a secluded

corner to drink and nurse the fresh wound to Adam's ego. Before they had made it ten paces in that direction, however, they heard Mister Davenport announce in his clear, nasal voice that dinner was to be served at the guests' convenience.

Colin could not deny the bright, warm feeling that spread throughout himself as he glimpsed Diana smile and laugh in her conversation with his mother. Nor the inexplicable relief he felt at having seen her reject Adam's advances.

I've seen far too many clever women fall for his charms and regret it later. It's good that Diana is too intelligent for that.

Diana looked up and met Colin's eyes. With a start, he realised he had an imbecilic smile on his lips, and before he could erase it, he saw Diana scowl and turn her back to him.

* * *

"Mister Arnold!"

"As I live and breathe, Victoria, here she is!"

Diana rushed to the side of the wizened couple, feeling joy rush through her body and fill her with life once more. Though both Mister and Missus Arnold were hardly any older than her parents, they were small, thin people by nature. Tonight, they appeared much older than the last time she had seen them, so papery and delicate that she feared they might blow away in a mild wind.

At the last moment, Diana held herself back from wrapping her arms around the pair, pausing a pace away and folding her arms behind herself awkwardly. She looked around them, feeling dozens of eyes take in her girlish run disparagingly.

“Diana, my dear, it is so wonderful to see you.” Seemingly held upright by her stiff, high-necked, old-fashioned blue dress, Missus Arnold looked Diana up and down, her eyes brimming with tears. “I was so very sorry to hear about your poor mother and father. What a horrible end for two such lovely people.”

Diana took the hand offered by Missus Arnold and squeezed it in gratitude. “Thank you, Missus Arnold. Mister Arnold,” she squeaked, feeling the flood of tears rise as if to overwhelm her.

“Mister Arnold and I have been thinking of you so often. I’m sorry we haven’t been able to come by and see you before this, but our letters to Sir James have gone un—”

“But we thought best to wait until we had been invited,” Jerome Arnold finished for his wife. Diana watched a brief, wordless argument transpire in a glance between the two.

“It doesn’t matter,” Diana said, drawing in a deep breath and drinking in the sight of these two familiar faces. “It’s just so good to see you both!”

“Oh, yes, yes,” said Missus Arnold airily. “Well, as well as one can be under such conditions, I suppose!” She and Diana shared a dark, cynical laugh at this pronouncement.

Heedless of the other dinner party guests, who continued their mingling and idle chatter elsewhere in the room, Jerome led the trio to a far corner of the massive salon, far enough that Diana could barely make out any words spoken by the other guests. When they reached the hearth by the southern wall, he stopped and fixed Diana with an inscrutable look.

“But really, what is there to say of two dull old people like us? What we want to hear about is *you*, Diana. You must tell us absolutely everything since the ... accident. Have you been feeling well? I trust Sir James has made sure your every need is met?”

His bleary eye only roved away from Diana toward James Leeson for an instant, but it was enough to fill Diana with anxiety once more. *He's a good man, you idiot girl, you can trust him! Tell him how beastly Uncle James has been, and perhaps you can persuade him to petition the court to have him removed as your guardian!*

The idea seemed sensible enough that Diana felt her blood run warm with excitement—her salvation might finally be at hand! But before she could open her mouth to explain all she had gone through, a horrible series of thoughts sprang into her mind, fully-formed.

It's not as though I've been put out on the street or beaten each night—not really. Though Uncle James' guardianship chafes me terribly, what sort of ungrateful child would I be to complain about being kept in such relative safety and luxury? And if Mister Arnold is powerless to do anything, as Uncle James has implied many a time ... all whingeing would accomplish is to sadden him and dear Missus Arnold.

There seemed to be nothing for it. She closed her mouth and put on a

brave look of contentment, trying to silence the crying out of her soul as she closed this door to deliverance and latched it behind her.

“Oh, it has been such ... such a relief to be here, Mister Arnold,” Diana said in a loud, lively voice. “Uncle James has been taking such wonderful care of me these last days. I have been very ... just so *very* fortunate to have him as my guardian.” With these words, she summoned up every ounce of strength in her body to give Mister and Missus Arnold a reassuring smile.

But there was no deceiving Jerome Arnold, whose eye, rheumy though it might be, was as keen as ever. Even in the momentary silence during which Diana looked away from the friendly pair in shame, she could feel him effortlessly peel away the strong façade she had hastily assembled around herself—though not with cruelty. *Stupid girl*, she thought, fighting to keep breathing. *Why did you try to deceive him when you know he can see right through you? It’s demeaning to him and you in equal measure.*

She felt herself wince as, out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement approach her ... but of course, it was only a fatherly pat on the shoulder from dear Mister Arnold. She met his gaze, feeling herself colour with embarrassment, yet he spoke not a word of acknowledgement of what they both knew he had discerned.

“Your dear mother and father would be so terribly proud of you, Diana,” said Mister Arnold in his creaky voice, a sideways smile on thin face. “You have dealt with a most horrendous turn of fortune with grace and aplomb. That is something to be admired.”

Images of hurled invectives and thrown dishes flashed through Diana’s mind, and she felt a perverse impulse to laugh. *If you could only see how I comport myself in this house, dear Mister Arnold, you might not be so free with your praise*, she thought. But she could not give voice to

such a thing, even in jest; Mister Arnold's esteem was far too valuable to endanger. So she only smiled and clasped his wrinkled hand delicately in her own.

"If only you could have been named my guardian, Mister Arnold," Diana heard come from her lips in a low voice. She felt she should clap her hands over her mouth, to deny having said such a thing, to insist it was only a joke ... but though this admission escaped her mouth by happenstance, she knew she could not gainsay the truth of the words.

Mister Arnold slowly patted the back of her hand and looked at her with a sad smile. "That would have been a most gratifying thing. But the Lord has other things in mind for all of us, it seems."

Diana could not resist glancing over at Uncle James. Though he was on the far side of the room from her, still holding court over his toadies, she could see the intensity of his gaze in her direction. Their eyes met, and a grim, humourless spirit fell over James Leeson's gaze.

If only He were the only one with designs for my future ...

Chapter 8

A Most Thrilling Duel

The dinner was served not in the private dining room that had become her familiar battleground but instead in a grand hall Diana had scarcely ever seen since arriving in the Leeson house. Where the family dining room was ostentatious, this hall was royally opulent, with a table that stretched fifty yards from one end to the other and countless candles winking down on them from three massive crystal chandeliers.

The floor of Italian marble was polished to a fine sheen, and the table set with fifty identical place settings for all the guests to dine at simultaneously, even if it was far enough from one end of the thing to the other and the ceiling was so high and prone to echoes that Diana could scarcely guess how any kind of meaningful conversation could be had in the enormous room.

The pomp and braggadocio turned Diana's stomach. She glanced about, certain she would spot Gerard Dunn or some other repulsive would-be suitor lying in wait in a sconce or behind a column. Even the thought of having to play at politeness with such a creature put a shiver down Diana's body—coupled with the churning of her belly, she found herself in a most uncomfortable state.

Somewhat dizzy and fearing she might faint, Diana hastened to her assigned seat and slumped into it without waiting for any servant or well-meaning visitor to pull out her chair for her. Ignoring all she had been taught of etiquette, she leaned forward with her head propped haphazardly in her hands, her elbows keeping her from collapsing fully onto the table.

Her eyes flitted from one guest to another. Some were faces she dimly recalled having seen at society affairs before her parents' death, but all were strangers to her. Each figure seemed to register that she was examining them and shot her a scouring glance out of the corner of their eye. Diana sniffed, filled with resentment.

Here I am, an abused wretch who is being held prisoner and robbed by my own guardian, she thought despairingly. It does not matter a whit to any of these beasts; they are concerned only with their own comfort, with what Uncle James can do for their bellies or purses. I could be tied to the rack in the corner of the room, and they would not even notice ... save perhaps to comment snidely on my posture or my manner of dress, I suppose.

So consumed was she by these thoughts of doom that she barely registered even the familiar sound of her name, dismissing it as an unimportant echo within her mind. It was only on the third repetition from someone standing nearly next to her that Diana thought to look up from her table setting.

“Diana!”

She drew in a stunned breath, unable to believe the apparition she saw before her. It was a familiar young woman she saw, with long brown curls cascading down past her narrow shoulders and an elegant sea-green gown. Then the shock was transmuted into glee, and Diana was on her feet to embrace her friend with both arms, heedless of the sidelong glances this breach of protocol earned from James Leeson and sundry guests.

“Leah! My God, is it really you?” Diana laughed, feeling tears rush to her eyes.

Leah's laughter trickled happily into her ears, and Diana felt herself squeezed tight. "Well, I certainly hope so!"

All the relief and comfort that had been denied her over the last month came flooding back into Diana in a sudden torrent. Not only was she once again in the company of a beloved friend, but Missus Leeson had done as Diana asked her after all and sent an invitation on her behalf—*Someone in this bloody house has a heart after all, then!* Diana shook in her friend's arms, afraid she might melt into incoherent tears. "Oh, there's so much to tell you! I have missed you so much, my dear friend. I can scarcely put it all into words!"

"Well, I see no need to cut our reunion short," said Leah, pulling away and giving Diana a comforting smile. "It seems I'm to be seated right next to you, anyway. Between you and Mother, that is."

Diana started at the words, suddenly aware of the presence of Leah's mother standing by her side. She blushed as she paid Missus Reid a more appropriate greeting, then took her seat as the last of the other guests did the same, and the first course of the grand meal was brought out by silent servants.

"I can scarcely believe the vastness of this dining hall," said Leah quietly in Diana's direction. "From the street, one really gets no idea just how enormous this house really is."

Diana nodded, feeling herself laugh under her breath. "Best of all, the room is so massive that I can scarcely hear whatever it is Uncle James is going on about at the head of the table," she said, nodding in the direction of her guardian. Indeed, the pair could see him standing and orating something in a grandiose fashion, but at this distance from the far side of the table, his words were rendered into incomprehensible

echoes.

“Don’t worry; I’m sure you can find someone down here to bellow at you if you’ve begun to miss it.”

Diana shot a look in the direction of the words and felt herself almost choke at the sight of Colin Mullens and that slimy friend of his seated just a few places away from her. Leah put a hand on Diana’s knee as if to hold back the temper that she knew was roiling, but Diana spat, “Only if you’d like to give me the chance to break some dishware, Mister Mullens,” before turning back toward Leah.

“Is this that the stepson of Sir James?” Leah whispered behind a raised hand.

“Why? Have you heard anything of him?”

“Only a few whispers here and there. They say he’s a reputation for being a bit of a wastrel, prone to spending a good deal of time in taverns and social clubs of mixed repute. Though on the whole, I’ve heard he is an upstanding, witty, loyal young man. For a bachelor, at least.”

Diana looked scornfully in Colin’s direction, dismayed to see he was already staring in her direction. “Some people are just blessed with a far greater reputation than they deserve,” she growled.

“What’s happened? Has he done anything untoward? Oh, Diana, you must tell me!” Leah enthused.

But Diana could scarcely take her eyes away from the piercing green orbs of Colin Mullens, which stayed trained on her with a keenness that frightened her. “Not here,” Diana said, taking a sip of her soup and finding it cold already. “I’ll tell you everything, but not in front of so many people. Will you come and see me tomorrow afternoon?”

“You couldn’t keep me away.”

The first course was consumed without incident, as was the second, though Diana found herself tasting none of it. She forced herself to look away from Colin, but she somehow could not keep her mind fixed on her conversation with Leah and her mother. By the time the meat was served, she had grown hot with resentment, feeling that this single moment of happiness in the company of her friend had been stolen away from her by Uncle James’ stepson.

“Why, Mullens, I must say, you really have done Miss Hann an awful injustice,” said Adam Radcliffe in a mock whisper to Colin. He looked over to her and winked before continuing, “You didn’t mention how much lovelier she is when she is angry.”

Colin shushed his friend, stifling laughter. This only served to encourage Adam, who went on in a louder voice, “I haven’t the faintest idea what could be causing it, but she must be *very* angry indeed at this moment if you catch my meaning!”

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “You are a learned man, aren’t you, Mister Radcliffe?” she asked through gritted teeth.

This seemed to take Adam aback. “I ... am not usually so

characterised. But I have been to school, yes. From time to time, anyway. When I am not occupied with more worthwhile pastimes, such as those concerning the fairer—”

“Zoology?”

Adam chortled at this, and Diana’s eyes narrowed still further. Before he could loose the ribald joke he seemed to have loaded and ready to fire, she said quickly, “Perhaps you have had the opportunity to study examples of aposematism, then.”

Adam blinked at her, uncomprehending. Diana felt Leah poke her in the ribs as though to warn her to stop, but she could not resist continuing, “The bright, beautiful colours of a reptile or insect are used to communicate something very particular to its prospective predators.”

“*Danger,*” said Colin brightly. Adam looked to him with dismay. “Or *‘stay away,’* depending on the animal.”

“Precisely, Mister Mullen.” Diana looked to Adam with as much venom as she could conjure, daring him to ask for further elaboration. She must have been at least moderately successful, as she could see a shiver run down the man as he withered beneath her gaze.

“I ... see,” stammered Adam Radcliffe. Diana glared at him, and it was not more than a second before the man averted his eyes lest he be scalded. He took a long sip of his wine, giving himself time to collect his thoughts, then glanced back up at Diana. “That was most ... well, ah, educational, Miss Hann. Th ... thank you?”

Diana returned smugly to her dish of food, satisfied that she had shut down Adam's advances for good and all.

"Pearls before swine, I'm afraid."

She swung her glare up again to see Colin, his usual mirthsome expression plastered on his face. "I've wasted many an hour trying to help this brute with everything from arithmetic to geography. It's no good; his mind's already full to the brim with asinine banter."

"Here now, Mullens—" Adam began to protest.

"Though, of course, your lesson is more immediately useful than anything Mister Radcliffe could find in a schoolbook. It may just save his life, as you say."

Diana did not even have to pause to assemble a reply. "And just where and when did *you* learn that it might be worthwhile to pay close attention to what a young woman tells you? I can't say I have seen an abundance of schoolbooks lying around your stepfather's house."

"Ah, I see the confusion, then." Colin leaned forward across the table, a wicked glint in his eye. "You see, there are, in fact, in the world *other* books besides the primers you may be familiar with. I encourage you to pick one up now and again—they may have some rather long words in them, but you might find the experience most gratifying nonetheless."

Leah tugged at Diana's sleeve and laughed politely. "Dearest Diana,

perhaps it's time to leave such things behind for a time. Especially at such a lovely dinner party— isn't this food absolutely divine? What did you say it was called, Mother?"

Diana felt a wave of irritation at being interrupted in the middle of her exchange with Colin. *If you think I need rescuing from this skirmish, Leah, you don't know me as well as you think you do*, she thought bitterly.

"Ah, I see, then it is a literate sort of girl that your friend is seeking, rather than an angry dullard like me." Diana found herself matching Colin's posture, leaning in his direction across the table with her fingers clenched into fists, then released into a gesture of easy, patronising generosity. "Odd that you two would spend so much time in gin-soaked taverns in search of such a mate."

If she hoped this would offend Colin, she was disappointed to hear him bark with laughter at this charge. "Well, I certainly cannot stay at home! Not when there's an aposematic viper skulking around the corridors."

"Typical for a man, Leah, just as I've said to you a thousand times. Men are such helpless creatures when it comes to any real threat—they count on we women to deal with bloody matters when they think no one is looking."

"I do not wish to deflate your healthy opinion of yourself, but I've been bitten by far fiercer creatures if never swallowed."

"I doubt any creature could stomach the sight of you long enough to keep you down."

She glanced angrily toward Adam, aggravated yet morbidly curious why he had not chimed in with an insolent quip of his own, only to see his mouth hanging agape dumbly—the swain’s eyes flitted from Diana to Colin and back again, as if unable to understand what was going on before his very face. Out of the corner of her eye, Diana could see Leah had a very similar awestruck expression on her face. Distantly she detected other conversations were quieting, perhaps overawed by her verbal warfare with Colin.

Detecting an opening, Colin swooped in with another jab, a practised look of apathy on his sculpted features. “More’s the pity for any beast who makes the attempt—if I’m told true by my friends and lovers, I’m nearly as venomous as you yourself, Miss Hann.”

“That would explain why you have to leave your stepfather’s home so often, then, so as not to smother the other occupants with your toxicity.”

Vaguely Diana heard herself being shushed by Leah’s mother or someone else nearby, but by now, she was fully swept up in the thrill of this verbal altercation.

“This has been most illuminating, Miss Hann, but I think for your sake, we should discontinue listing my flaws,” grumbled Colin, seemingly roused to real anger for the first time since Diana had met him.

“Are you sure? I’m sure I could think of another fifty or sixty more if you give me a moment to think.”

“If you do, Miss Hann, I fear you may stumble upon some that even your foul mouth cannot bear the taste of.”

By now, the two of them were half-standing, their faces leaning close across the polished expanse of the table. “I’ve a foul mouth, have I? You should know, having encountered more than your share. Being an expert on such things, I would certainly trust your judgment on the filthiness of my mouth.”

An odd expression came across Colin’s face at this accusation, but he did not back down by a single iota. “Come to think of it, Miss Hann, you’re right. In all my travels and all my forays into the gutters of this blighted city, I cannot think of a single individual, man or woman, who has an ounce of your viciousness and—”

Before Colin could finish his sentence, the still air of the room was filled with a rumble that Diana quickly recognized as polite applause.

“Hear, hear!”

“Well said!”

These and similar pleasantries stopped the words in Colin’s throat—when she followed his gaze, she saw that the young man was looking towards his stepfather, who had a glass raised in the air as though giving a toast. Diana caught the eye of one or two other guests, who were looking to her as though she had been in the middle of something terribly rude, and from further in Uncle James’ direction, she saw James Arnold shaking his head sadly at her. It occurred to Diana with a sickening feeling just how loud her sparring with Colin had grown.

Curse that blasted uncle of mine, always doing something to pull everyone's attention in his direction, Diana seethed. And of course, he would interrupt just as things are beginning to get interesting for once in...

She drew in a sharp breath, eyes growing wide even as she leaned against the back of her chair with a stiffening posture. *This has been interesting, hasn't it?* Diana thought, feeling genuine surprise at how much she had been enjoying herself. In fact, she could scarcely remember the last time she had been so focused on any activity at all—usually her grief was waiting day and night to pounce and steal away her attention.

Colin might be a bounder and a shameless lackey of his wicked stepfather, but arguing with him is really most ... well, stimulating. I cannot remember ever encountering a wit so keen. And even if it slashes in my direction from time to time, a wit needs a target as a sword needs a scabbard.

Diana looked to Colin and felt an odd sense of dismay to see a trickle of sweat roll down his temple. He was looking at Uncle James reverently, ignoring the jokes Adam Radcliffe muttered to him, and a crestfallen blush was on his cheeks. She looked to her uncle, then back to Colin in wonderment. *Is he truly the dutiful stepson he wishes to be thought of? That unquestionably looks more like fear than love on his rugged features.*

Unsure why this realisation was affecting her so much, Diana breathed a tiny, exhausted sigh, then politely joined in the cheers that accompanied the end of Uncle James' oration. *I still do not trust that Colin Mullens*, she thought. *But I suppose there is no reason for me to make his life any harder than I must. Whatever else he may be, he deserves better treatment than that.*

The night was dark, overcast, and surprisingly chilly for the time of year. Still, Colin reflected, the chill felt good on his skin, as did the cool glass of wine he rolled between his fingers from his vantage point on the balcony. He spent most of his life in a state of over-warmth, in fact, a condition only heightened by crowds, large meals, and drink—not that that compelled him to avoid any of those things, of course. But late evenings would usually see him alone in the out of doors, the cold air serving to sober him up even as it cooled his fiery blood.

Unfortunately, this habit also tended to coincide with the moments when Colin felt himself pulled into a morass of melancholy. These quiet, reverent hours beneath the starless sky were peaceful, without a doubt, but if he were not careful, he would begin questioning the nature of his existence, and his inability to produce any answers worth mentioning turned his mood darker still. Worse still, whenever he had imbibed more than a bottle of wine—as he had tonight—he found himself feeling terribly, achingly lonely.

It is good to be back here, after all, Colin thought to himself in most deliberate terms, trying to pull himself back from the brink of that maudlin condition. *Travel has its charms, but there is nothing quite like the pleasures of treasured friends in a familiar setting.* He smiled and sipped his claret, forcing himself to recall some of Adam's witticisms and clever jokes made by some of his other acquaintances, whom Sir James had generously invited for Colin's benefit.

But tonight, his thoughts were undisciplined, slipping away from him like fish in a stream. Each time Colin thought on some pleasurable moment, his mind turned inexorably to Diana Hann—to her voice, raised in anger or dripping with sarcasm, and to her face, filled with electric life.

I can scarcely remember the time anyone could keep up with my jibes, thought Colin as he rubbed his chin in thought. Least of all, a woman.

Indeed, even at the most fashionable salons of London or elsewhere in Europe, after a certain point, Colin's scathing wit tended to be met by dumb laughter or unsmiling disapproval. He had begun to think of himself as a swordsman without a worthy adversary, outmatching and embarrassing other would-be verbal duellists. Now, after all his years of idle conversation and worthless social obligations, it seemed he was confronted at last by someone who could parry his every blow and land a few of her own.

He had not even noticed until Adam Radcliffe had kicked his shin under the table and waggled his eyebrows at him suggestively. That was when it finally occurred to Colin that he had been acting like a child fascinated by a rare animal or magic trick, and he had avoided looking in Diana's direction again for the rest of the evening.

Though even seeing her only out of the corner of his eye, he could not help listening in on her conversation with her friend by her side. A smile came to Colin's face once more, recalling her happy words and frequent laughter. *She sounded so very different from the last few days—happier, lighter. All the heaviness that usually hangs from her seemed to evaporate, leaving her as carefree and radiant as a cloud. It would be good if I could hear her in such a mood more frequently ...*

He stopped, shook his head, suddenly feeling filled with embarrassment for a reason he could not identify. "A most amusing novelty, a clever woman like that," Colin said aloud, draining the last of his wine and setting his empty glass down on the stone balustrade. "Nothing more."

Colin muttered empty statements of this sort as he went back into the house, leaving the balcony empty in the night air.

“That’s enough of that,” he muttered to himself.

And, “A most thrilling duel, as such things go.”

“Not a bad evening indeed, I suppose.”

“Can’t say I mind.”

The quiet words echoed from the dark halls as Colin made his way to his room, where he shut the door behind him and proceeded to undress before collapsing into his bed.

... But the blissful visitation of sleep did not come for him. Nor was he truly alone, at least in his mind. The moment Colin closed his eyes, he was not enrobed in oblivious darkness but presented with an image of Diana Hann. Colin was so surprised by what ran through his mind that he did not attempt to leash his thoughts, instead letting his imagination free to frolic.

He saw Diana as he had seen her earlier in the evening—her eyes flashing in that singularly attractive way they had, her red-gold curls bouncing and shaking with each harsh word she snapped in his direction. Colin smiled at the remembrance, feeling himself flush with admiration and something altogether more compelling.

Then the image changed, and he fancied he saw Diana as he never had in his waking life. She was no longer clad in the fashionable if plain

gown she had worn at dinner that night but instead wore the garb of a Spanish princess of yore—an elaborate gown of rich, royal red, cut so tight and low that her womanly form seemed ripe to burst from its seams.

Diana was standing close to him, her lips pink and swollen, her eyes glistening with some powerful emotion. All the stars that had been absent in the sky appeared above the two of them, dancing and swirling in the shadows. Colin extended his arms, and then Diana was in them—she felt good in his embrace, fitting perfectly into the empty complement of his silhouette like a hand in a glove.

Ridiculous, thought Colin, though the voice of his waking mind had grown quiet, dim. *What a preposterous idea, especially behaviour such as this from as wild a woman as Diana. I had better forget this whole thing, or I will burst into laughter when I see her in the morning.*

Sleep prickled at the edge of his consciousness now, but Colin swatted it away impatiently even as he began to yawn. The shade of Diana held him tightly, her eyes looking up to him reverently. He shifted in bed—he could feel the heat from her body, somehow, feel the tension in her muscles and the desire knotted still deeper within her pulsing in time with his own. Her perfect red lips parted, and Colin could not tell if she meant to say something ... but instead her long pale eyelashes fluttered closed, and their bodies grew closer still.

Just as their lips collided in a glorious burst of light and sensation, sleep cruelly fell upon Colin Mullens, blotting out the continuation of the dream in the oblivion of slumber.

Chapter 9

The Ancient Sentinel

It was only her second time traipsing through the empty halls of the Leeson house in the early morning, but already Diana had begun to think of it as a kind of ritual. The place looked positively transformed from its usual gloomy appearance, painted in radiant shades of gold and amber by the sunlight flooding through the ground floor corridor's many windows.

Today, Diana resolved, there would be no sneaking, no hiding or meekly trying to steal basic necessities like a mouse scurrying out from the shadows in pursuit of a forgotten crumb of bread. No, this morning, she walked with her head held high down the hallway, striking a leisurely pace and pausing to examine the ornaments and decorations that festooned its walls.

About halfway between the grand staircase and the end of the corridor, she came across an enormous portrait of who else but the master of the house, Sir James Leeson. Diana had always kept her eyes averted from the monstrous painting, fearful on some half-serious level that her guardian might be concealed in a secret room behind the oily representation of himself. But today was already a day unlike other days, and instead, Diana found herself standing with her back against the opposing wall, considering the portrait for the first time.

Nearly twelve feet tall and half as wide, the painting showed Uncle James in what Diana hoped was not meant to be fashionable modern dress. He was standing in a reasonable facsimile of his study, surrounded by books and ink pens and all manner of clutter. The great man was towering imperiously over the viewer, one hand in his jacket and the other resting on the desk.

And something was subtly wrong about Uncle James' face, she thought. It was a remarkable likeness, really, with every steely grey hair of his moustache exactly in place. The eyes of the painting, too, possessed all of the casual cruelty that the man himself always carried in his gaze. It took Diana another minute of examining the painting before she realised that the face had been repainted in some places, as though finished and later corrected.

I've seen enough of London's society and their portraits of themselves to know how assiduously a painter will conceal any flaw, exaggerate any attractive characteristic, she thought, a wondering smirk playing across her lips. I wonder if this artist struggled to capture his subject's likeness, his brush stubborn and unwilling when tasked with painting such a face?

Or did he turn in a picture of Uncle James with a generous smile on his face, then was furiously told by his patron to go back and make him look twice as vicious? Seems the sort of thing Uncle James would do—the man wishes to be loved, but not half so much as he wishes to be feared.

Diana shivered at the thought. She walked on, not wishing to spend another moment beneath those baleful eyes. It was not until she entered the family dining room that she realised exactly what she expected to find therein.

“Good morning, Miss Hann. I see you’ve decided to go on living after all, then. There’s a good girl.”

Diana gave a wicked grin as she took her place at the table opposite Colin and speared a wedge of cheese with her knife. “Don’t be so sure. Perhaps I’ve simply decided to have a hearty breakfast before ending it all. It would be a shame to perish on an empty stomach.”

Colin pulled a face and nodded towards the food between them on the table. “No less tragic than your last meal being this appalling fare. Downright criminal, even. Unless you mean to do yourself in with one of these boulders that Cook has the audacity to call scones?”

“A lady shouldn’t make such decisions while hungry.” Diana laughed. She chewed thoughtfully as she held aloft her cheese knife and waved it gently in Colin’s direction. “You might wish to avert your eyes. I may decide to hurry up my bloody fate at any moment. And as we know, you men have no stomach for blood; I’d hate the last thing I see before passing away to be the sight of you fainting like a little girl with a bee sting.”

Colin sat back heavily in his chair, his arms folded. He looked at Diana, seemingly for the first time really looking, rather than judging or pulling a crude or judgemental face. Diana felt herself grow anxious at the sustained eye contact but would not allow herself to look away. *If he’s waiting for me to flinch first, he’ll have to wait longer than that.*

“Interesting,” he said at last.

Diana blinked—she did not know what she had expected him to say, but it was not that.

“Really, I mean it,” said Colin with excitement in his voice. “I should say this is the most interesting conversation I have had in some time, were it not for our equally fascinating encounter at last night’s dinner party.”

“And here I thought you were trying to tear me to pieces verbally,” she muttered, dropping a lump of sugar into her teacup.

“Oh, I was!” Colin’s smile had grown downright manic by now. “As you were to me unless I miss my guess. But you make for a most formidable opponent, Miss Hann. Really, remarkably so—most women, and most men, would have given up long before that, but you gave to me nearly as good as you got.”

“Better. Pass the marmalade.”

Though she still felt ill at ease at this apparent bout of flattery from Colin Mullens, Diana permitted herself to lower her guard a bit. Their verbal jabs and parries continued at a brisk pace between mouthfuls of boiled egg and fresh fruit, and within a few minutes, Diana found that she was wiping away tears of laughter.

In fact, before long, Diana had found herself growing downright relaxed in the man’s company. There was the strange vulnerability she had seen in him the previous evening, of course ... and, she could not fail to notice, he was a handsome enough man with his striking green eyes and flowing dark hair.

But only for an instant. Even as she felt herself smiling like a simpleton as she looked at Colin Mullens, she saw him cut his slice of ham and lift a morsel to his lips in *exactly* the same fashion she had seen Uncle James do a hundred times. With the force of a thundering stampede, Diana was reminded that this clever young swain was an agent of her guardian’s, that he would betray anything she told him to his stepfather in a heartbeat.

Don’t let yourself get too comfortable, foolish girl, she chided herself,

digging into her breakfast with increased haste. *Even if he is diverting enough company, he is no friend to you.*

Soon enough she had finished her plate of food. The instant she had swallowed the last bite, she stood from the table. "Thank you for your company, Mister Mullens," Diana said stiffly and moved to make her exit, glancing at the clock as she did so. If she hurried, she could make it out to the grounds and pass another morning walking and reading her book before Uncle James awoke.

"You are welcome, of course." With these words, Colin matched her movements, tossing his napkin over his plate and pushing in his own chair before stepping after Diana towards the door.

She stopped and lifted a finger in Colin's direction. "Either your social graces are out of practise, or mine are, sir," said Diana coldly.

Colin smiled and continued to step slowly towards her. "Not so much so that I would forget to offer my services as guide to a young lady who is still unfamiliar with our home."

Diana felt the impulse to wrinkle her nose at this suggestion and did not hold herself back from indulging in this expression. "A kind suggestion, I'm sure, but I think even my poor, simple, womanly brain can find its way around a garden without the aid of a navigator."

Laughter danced in Colin's eyes. "I would hardly suggest otherwise. Really, I was making an offer of my company for its own sake rather than for any possible utility in exploring the grounds ... though I do know a place or two you might not discover on your own, I think. I know I certainly don't have anything better to do, and I hardly think you have offers from any other dashing, witty young men to choose

from.”

She felt something inside herself tense at the proposition, and she fought the urge to shrink away. “You and I, walking around outside? I hardly think that is ... appropriate, do you? Even if we are only on the grounds of the estate, it’s not exactly proper for an unmarried man and woman to spend such time in one another’s company.”

Colin laughed at that, long and loud—enough so that Diana felt he was concealing something in the pleasant ringing of his laugh. After he regained his senses, he waved his hand dismissively.

“While I’m flattered at the implication that you think you and I would ever be considered an appropriate match by anyone on God’s green Earth—” Diana felt her cheeks grow hot, and she opened her mouth to protest, but Colin continued speaking before she got an opportunity, “I think it’s hardly anything worth worrying about in our case, our personalities aside. We live with one another, for one thing, and whatever holes or crevices you think I may hide myself in during my normal life, we will hardly be going anywhere private.”

Still blushing furiously at the insinuation, Diana prepared herself to throw the invitation back into his face. *I don’t need him to figure out where the blasted trees and flowers are in this place*, she thought darkly. *I don’t need a minion of Uncle James’ following my moves, guiding me where he will, either. And I certainly don’t need any company—at least, not the kind of company a rascal like this can offer!*

But then Colin Mullens just gave a shrug. Closing his eyes and turning to leave, he said in a soft voice, “Certainly, I will respect your wishes either way. If you are afraid to accept my offer, I will leave you to—”

“Oh, stop your prattling, and let’s get walking.” Diana did not turn back as she strode out of the room, but she could feel Colin laugh and amble after her.

* * *

“Lovely to see Christopher’s got the weeds under control for a change,” said Colin, gesturing to a spray of purple flowers that flanked the winding garden path. Diana breathed in deeply, her senses awash in the sweet fullness of the blossoms that surrounded them at the edge of the little woodland towards the back of the grounds. “The lavender looks quite pretty this year ... or, no, that’s columbine, not lavender.”

Diana smiled as she recalled her uncomfortable walk with Gerard Dunn a few days earlier. “Granny’s bonnet, isn’t it called? Beautiful flowers ... and quite delicious, I’m told.”

“I see Missus Fessler has been sharing her knowledge of herbalism with you.” Colin chuckled, a wry smile on his face. “Unfortunately, even if I were hungry enough to take my lunch from Sir James’ flower garden, I’ve heard the same story. She is a crafty one, our Missus Fessler.”

“I gather you have to be to survive in this house.”

Diana sucked in another hearty breath, revelling in the feeling of life and lightness that permeated her limbs as her lungs savoured the fresh air. It felt to Diana that she and Colin had only just come outside a moment before, but by the elevation of the sun in the sky, it seemed they had passed an hour or more chatting and meandering around the spacious Leeson grounds.

She had clung doggedly to her suspicion of the man, keeping at least a yard between them and never missing an opportunity to fling another conversational barb in his direction ... but she could not deny that it was growing ever more difficult to hang onto this distrust. He really was a personable companion for a walk such as this and was full of knowledge—or at least clever witticisms—about all the flora and fauna they passed on their perambulations.

“This is what I wanted to show you.”

Diana looked up, roused from her thoughts, and glanced around in search of what Colin was referring to. They were not more than one hundred yards from the house, in a woody grove much like any other on the grounds. Eventually, her gaze fell onto an old, stunted walnut tree squatting at the top of a small grassy knoll. It was not especially large, but with bare branches that were twisted and warped by time, it did stand out from the prettier surroundings in a stark, chilling kind of way.

“When Mother and I first came to live here with Sir James, I was profoundly curious about this old beast. I tried to climb it and ended up taking a rather nasty fall.” Colin rubbed his shoulder ruefully, his strong arms half-visible through his thin white shirt. “Still gets stiff in the cold from time to time, but I don’t bear the tree any grudge. How could I?”

“It’s ... lovely,” Diana said, unsure just how sincerely she believed this judgement. There was a long-healed old slash across the trunk, stretching nearly all the way around the tree. She put a hand up to the black, gnarled trunk but pulled herself back before making contact. Something about the wood felt cold and wet before she even brought her skin against it. It was frightening, somehow, but the sublime beauty of the thing was palpable. “At the very least, I can’t say I’ve seen anything like ... Colin?”

She looked around, suddenly discovering that she was apparently alone by the old walnut tree. Diana shaded her eyes and looked back in the direction in which they'd come, then recoiled as a fast-moving shadow passed in front of her face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you! Not really, anyway." Colin's laughter rained down upon her from his position sitting on a long, stout branch of the walnut tree. This was yet another variety of laughter, different from any she had heard from Colin previously—mirthful, slightly abashed, without any touch of malice. It occurred to Diana just then how many shades of laughter the man might contain in depths she had yet to encounter.

"Come on," Colin said brightly, bracing himself against the tree and reaching an arm down to her.

Diana folded her arms. "You cannot sincerely mean it. Climb a tree like a monkey?"

"Of course not!" His eye twinkled with merriment. "There's no chance you would have half the proficiency of a monkey."

She rolled her eyes, her good sense already vociferous with its objections to this proposition. *Diana, you cannot seriously mean to continue allowing this miscreant to badger you into doing his bidding?*

Unfortunately, Diana's curiosity was considerably faster than her good sense, and by the time she had decided it would be a mistake to be cajoled into climbing a tree, she had already taken his hand and

wedged her foot into the narrow crotch of the tree. She let loose a most unladylike yelp, skirts flying erratically with the motion, and with a pull from his ironlike arms, she was hefted through the air and thumped down on the thick bough beside Colin.

“I cannot believe I let you talk me into this!”

“I’m a bit surprised myself, to be honest. I thought at least it would take a fair amount more talking than that.”

The two shared a laugh, their voices echoing down the hillock into the thick green foliage of the little Leeson woods. Diana’s breath was coming fast and hard from the exertion, her heart pumping in her chest. She felt a growing sense of excitement wriggle somewhere deep within herself, her limbs feeling pleasantly warm even as her head spun gently.

It must be the thrill of doing what’s not allowed, Diana thought, looking out into the treetops. I haven’t been permitted to climb a tree since I was a small girl, and I have not been alone in the presence of a man since before I can remember ... even if he is just my guardian’s stepson, and certainly not anyone with whom being seen would cause a scandal.

Then she moved her hand to the branch to shift her position against the hard, wrinkled wood and pulled away, feeling not wood but flesh. She looked over and saw she had brushed her fingers against Colin’s, and an embarrassed look flitted between them. As Diana looked away, back off into the distance, she realised just how close his body was to hers.

Not only close, but how much larger he was than her. And from the ease with which he had hefted her into the tree, there was clearly far

greater strength in his masculine arms than she had thought. These reflections prompted something inside beyond thought, beyond word, and the spinning sensation buried inside her frame grew still more intense.

“I’m sure this tree has seen quite a lot from its position here, hasn’t it?” she asked, hoping the inoffensive topic would thwart these unwanted thoughts.

“Oh, yes, this old man has been here longer than any of us.” He smiled and shook his head. “If you look closely, you can see some old wounds on one side of the trunk—my stepfather tried to have it cut down three or four times, but each time the workmen began their labour something would happen. Sir James ordered them to try again, but they would have nothing to do with it. Eventually, he gave it up as a bad job and decided to just try to ignore it.” Colin patted the rough black bark beneath him affectionately. “Tough old thing. It’s weathered God knows how many winters and shrugged off James Leeson like just another summer storm.”

Diana laughed at the thought of the servants ignoring Uncle James’ raging, and the two fell into a companionable silence. Its dangerous history aside, Colin had found a splendid vista from which to view the countryside in this gnarled tree.

“What were the stories you had heard? About the tree, I mean?” Diana asked, her fingers idly scratching against the thick bark of the walnut’s trunk.

Neither of them looked at the other, but she could feel Colin’s position shift, sense his gaze move a hundred miles off into the distance. Some large black birds wheeled and called to one another over the horizon, filling their silence with something mournful and dark.

Diana had begun to wonder if Colin had even heard her question when finally he said in a soft voice, "They told me someone once hanged himself here, from this tree."

She suppressed the shiver that was poised to shake her to the core. But her nails dug into the hard flesh of the tree, and her breath stilled in her chest.

"I first heard old Missus Fessler telling the story," Colin said in a distant, sad voice. "Though she wasn't quite so old back then, of course. She was talking to one of the cooks, somebody who isn't here anymore. They called it the 'Hanging Tree.' I was just seven years old, and somehow the details of what they were saying have faded from my memory. It must have been one of the previous occupants, some ancestor of whichever lord my stepfather purchased the estate from, I imagine. Probably there was some tale of scandal or lost love or the like; whatever it was, I felt compelled to see the place where it had happened."

He gave a harsh, humourless chuckle. "Even as a boy, I had rather a dark sense of humour, I suppose. I can't imagine what I might have expected to see—it's not as though they left the noose dangling from whichever branch it had been done from. I think I must have decided it was this one we're sitting on now, though I had no proof of it. Perhaps I just wanted some sort of physical connection to whichever distant land my own father had been carried away to. Between its appearance and Missus Fessler's story, this tree must have presented itself as a sort of ... I don't know, an intermediary. Between this life and the next. As if I could know whoever it was who had died here, could learn something of death so it would not frighten me so much. So I could stop it from taking someone else I loved."

The low bough of the tree fell once more into a quiet, uncomfortable silence. Suddenly the air felt thick and oppressively still, the songbirds

in the nearby foliage stifled. Diana's mind flew back to her jokes at the breakfast table an hour earlier—her dark jests seemed much less funny to her now.

After another long, tense pause, Colin sighed deeply. "To be honest, I don't remember much of what happened that day. I knew I must have fallen from the tree because the next thing I remembered, my stepfather was carrying me into the house. His arms were so big, and I remember he was cursing at someone nearby."

Diana felt Colin look over to her, but she could not bear to meet his gaze; she feared seeing the tears she heard in his voice, and then she would begin crying as well. "He never spoke to me of what had happened that day." After a few shuddering breaths, he spoke on. "I hadn't even finished healing before I was climbing this tree again, though. Even after what had happened, I couldn't keep myself away. Whenever I needed a moment to myself over the following years, I would come out and sit here, knowing my stepfather would not come after me again."

Colin's muscles were tense, his shoulders stooped. A sudden desire filled Diana, though precisely what it was she wanted escaped her. She wanted him to stop talking, to stop telling her such horrid things; she wanted to reach out and embrace the man, to comfort her.

She wanted him to reach out and embrace her; she wanted to flee and never lay eyes on Colin Mullens ever again. Her good sense, with its typically masterful timing, was utterly silent on the matter. Unsure just what she was doing, Diana took a breath, her arm moving toward Colin's thick shoulder ...

But by then something had changed, and Colin laughed once more, freezing Diana in place like a frightened rabbit—it was not the grim, dark laughter she had heard during his story of death and rescue, but

one that sounded hurried, impatient, wearing the painted-on smile of a clown. Whatever had peeked out at Diana had retreated back into its hermitage.

No, she thought, *not just peeking. It was reaching out to me, inviting me to reach back.* Suddenly the whole thing struck Diana as a heartbreakingly tragic thing.

The branch beneath her shook gently as Colin patted it affectionately. “The Hanging Tree and I have become quite acquainted, you know. Especially with such a view as this.”

In a great push, Colin dropped down from the branch. Diana felt a rush of fear, reaching out a hand and crying out his name in alarm ... but he had already landed nimbly on his feet, ten feet or so beneath her. He laughed again, more mockingly this time. “Concern? For a wicked soul such as I? Don’t waste your effort, My Lady; my bones have already been damned to Hell and aren’t worth your prayers.”

Diana matched his evil grin with one of her own and began to scramble down out of the tree. “For a wicked soul, you seem awfully sure that I was concerned about your safety. How do you know I wasn’t just barking at you not to forget to help me down in all your acrobatics, you conceited blade?”

“It’s not being conceited if I really *am* this remarkable.”

In a trice, the two were walking back toward the house; without a word spent on what had just transpired, it seemed they had mutually decided it was time to bring their adventure to an end. But Diana found herself walking much closer to Colin than she had an hour before. By the time they re-entered the house and made their way to

the back staircase, they were laughing and cracking jokes with one another again.

They stopped there, and it occurred to Diana that their enjoyable morning together had wound to an end. Trying to ignore the inexplicable pang of regret that sank into her heart at this thought, she forced a yawn and gestured to the stairway. "I thank you for a most entertaining morning, Mister Mullens. Now, I think it well past time for—"

"You know, Miss Hann," Colin said, interrupting her in a soft but insistent voice. They were standing near enough that she could feel his breath on her as he spoke this—a fact that he seemed to realise at the same time, as he dipped his eyes away before continuing, "I've, ah, I've heard from Missus Fessler that you still have not been shown around our home in any meaningful way."

Diana blinked, feeling the unmistakable crackle of energy pass to her from Colin's emerald green eyes. "I ... thought that was already clear. Why else would I be so eager for a tour of the grounds?"

Colin laughed awkwardly at this, his laughter absent of any of its usual causticity. "No, I mean ... that is, I know that. But I mean that the inside of Sir James' house has many of its own peculiarities, as I'm sure you have noticed."

"I'd like to think I have proven myself perceptive enough to pick up on such things, yes."

"Then perhaps we could ... continue the tour inside?" Colin coughed and rubbed the back of his head, looking away as though suddenly afraid of meeting Diana's gaze, though he still did not take a step

back. "If you do not have anything better to do, of course. And if I have not already bored you into an early grave with the tour to this point."

Diana readied herself to quip back at the man with a sarcastic remark ... but for the first time since she could remember, her mind did not supply her with such a comment. Instead, all she could think to do was to smile earnestly and say, "That sounds lovely; thank you."

But before she could give voice to this answer, a low baritone drifted down to them like a cannonball running down the stairs: "*Colin, is that you?*"

Right in front of her eyes, a transformation came over Colin. His posture was drawn straighter, his face suddenly shot with nervousness and then just as quickly covered with a stony, implacable façade. "Yes, Sir James!" he called up the stairs.

"I've something I need your help with if you're not otherwise occupied mucking about on an otherwise productive morning!" Though Diana could not see him from where she was standing, the irritation was plain in his voice, and the sound filled her with an urge to flee.

"I'll be right there, sir."

Colin immediately turned and began climbing the stairs, leaving an emptiness in the air by Diana's side that she had never felt before. He moved quickly to follow this order, his limbs stiff and jerky as he walked up to where the staircase turned.

But before he moved out of view, Colin Mullens turned back and flashed a boyish smile at Diana, one gleeful and excited and blastedly handsome enough that it left her staggered. By the time she recovered her senses, he was gone.

Chapter 10

A Plan of Action

“There, now, *that’s* the Diana I remember!” said Leah with a satisfied smile, her exuberant voice echoing from the high ceiling of the grand entryway to the Leeson house. Her hands were on either of Diana’s shoulders, and she was peering into her friend’s face as though examining it for cracks or chipped paint.

“Were you expecting someone else, then?” asked Diana with a laugh.

Her friend did not seem to share in her joke; Leah withdrew her hands and busied herself with passing her hat and light summer cloak to the footman who had let her into the house. Diana kept an eye on this servant as she was sure he was watching her in equal measure—she could never tell just who Uncle James had charged with supervising her and reporting back to him, but she assumed it was most of the household.

“Well, to be honest, I wasn’t quite sure who I would see after last night’s performance,” Leah said with a wry twist to her words. “The Diana Hann in attendance at that dinner party was rather a different person than I had been expecting.”

Diana wrung her hands together, feeling the blood run out of her face all in a hurry. “Really? In what way?”

Leah gave her a knowing smile, fists on her hips as though she had

caught Diana telling a childish untruth. “Oh, come now, Diana, I’m sure you’re well aware of how you were acting at the party! Stiff as a statue, fairly sleepwalking through the ordinary social graces. Except when you were berating that awful Colin Mullens, of course—that was a sight to see! And certainly, there was something very familiar about that temper, but all evening long, I looked in vain for any sign of the kind-hearted, lively, *fun* Diana Hann whom I’ve been so lucky to call a friend for most of my life. That’s the young woman I’ve been missing so for the last month!”

Diana’s eyes flitted to a nearby gilt-edged mirror and tried to circumspectly examine her reflection. She looked different, she realised—paler, older, more tired, even than just a few days before. She struggled to conjure an image of the Diana Leah was describing, but it felt like someone else’s memory or a crude student’s reproduction of a half-remembered painting.

I miss that Diana, too ... she thought, swallowing the lump that had formed in her throat.

Spotting the change in Diana’s mood, Leah came forward once more and took her friend’s hands, biting her lip in consternation. “Oh, dear, listen to me! I’m ever so sorry, Diana. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, it’s all right,” Diana protested, sniffing back a tear. “I know you were just—”

“Fiddlesticks! It hardly matters my intentions, Diana; I should be treating you with more kindness than that. I know how much you’ve been through.” Leah leaned closer and winked conspiratorially. “... Or I will, that is, once you make good on your promise and fill me in on everything that’s transpired!”

Diana sniffed away her lingering misery and matched her friend's smile. She looked around the mostly empty foyer and caught sight of Missus Fessler pottering around with a feather duster in hand, showing little circumspection in her supervision. "Come on, let me show you the gardens," Diana said brusquely, pulling Leah by the hand as she fled towards the back door.

The green rolling hills that made up this suburban arm of London had been blessed with warm, pleasant weather for many days by now, even until this very morning. This afternoon it seemed their fortune was determined to change: though the air was still seasonably warm, the sky was crowded with dismal grey clouds from one horizon to the other, and the frequent gusts of wind were enough to blow skirts and hair alike into wild tangles of colour.

Still, even a monsoon would not have persuaded Diana to bring her friend into the house of her hateful guardian. The friends wandered through the labyrinth of garden pathways, Diana barely pausing save to urge Leah not to fall behind.

"Surely we can talk here amid all these lovely flowers, can't we?" Leah gestured to the empty grounds that surrounded them. "We could hardly ask for anywhere more private to speak than this."

Where Leah's eye had found no one, though, Diana saw a hundred vantage points from which they might be observed. Just the hedges on the garden's western edge could contain Christopher or any one of a dozen garden labourers. She shaded her eyes and peered at the rows of windows on the wall of the Leeson manor, looking for any stirring in the curtains or shadowy figure looking down at them.

You're letting fear make a mockery of you, foolish girl. There's no one there, and even if there were, no one could hear you. Yet all the same,

Diana found herself walking away from the house into the garden, fighting against an uncomfortable tickle at the back of her neck that constantly compelled her to look back over her shoulder. Up one rise in the path and down the other side, Diana led them, only dimly realising where she was unavoidably leading them.

“I don’t mean to complain ...” Leah panted, struggling to keep up as she carried the edge of her skirts in one hand. “But had I known we would be going on such an expedition, I would have brought a horse. Or at least packed a meal.”

“And there’s the hyperbolic Leah Reid *I* missed so!” Diana giggled as they came to a stop before the ancient walnut tree. “Just in time, too. Here is a perfect place for us to talk.”

It felt strangely good to be in this place again. She was proud of knowing such a secluded space for them to speak freely—at least, that was what Diana told herself, roughly pushing aside the lingering memories of her thoroughly fraught interactions with Colin earlier that day.

But then Diana watched her friend look up at the huge black Hanging Tree and shudder. “I suppose no one would think to follow us to such an ugly part of the garden, would they? Good thinking, even if the view is quite this distasteful.”

A note of self-conscious disappointment echoed in Diana’s brain. Some part of her was stricken with an impulse to share all that Colin had told her, to extoll the queer virtues of this stark, unloved place. But she put this out of her mind, thinking at once how silly, even inappropriate such a thing would be to share. “It is rather a grim sight, at that ...” Diana murmured, at last, taking a seat on the grass beneath the shadow of the tree. Leah smoothed out her skirts, examined the ground closely for any trace of mud or insects, then sat

daintily down by Diana's side.

"Now," said Leah with an air of self-possessed confidence. She fixed Diana with a determined look. "I want you to tell me absolutely everything."

A thousand thoughts rushed to be the first through Diana's mouth. There were so many things she wanted to say that she could not think of where to start. The long nights and longer nightmares; the bullying and belittling from her guardian; the moments of unbearable despair broken by flashes of anger; the confounding, wholly unique mishmash of thoughts and feelings that had been stirred in her by Colin Mullens. After having her mouth hang open dumbly for several heartbeats, Diana was crushed to find nothing but a choked, inarticulate sob escape her lips. Then another wracked her body, and another still, flinging her into a limp, blubbing mess only barely held aloft in Leah's arms.

Stupid child! snapped the voice of Diana's good sense. *Cease this at once! This is no time for tears—someone has finally come to your aid, so you had better start talking like a sensible woman, and soon!* But it was no use; the floodgates opened, the tears Diana had kept bottled up inside her flowing freely in a torrent that wetted her friend's dress and left Diana shaking to draw breath.

"Oh, poor, poor Diana!" she heard Leah say, her voice dripping with sympathy. She shushed her softly, her hand rubbing circles on her back.

Diana had no way of knowing how long the sorrow took to escape her body fully, but by the time she had recovered her voice and sat upright under her own power, a light rain was drizzling down onto the grey-green grass. Leah proffered a handkerchief, a gesture that felt so ridiculously belated that Diana squeezed out a few more tears

through laughter.

"I'm sorry," Diana sniffled, but Leah shushed her once more.

"Now, now, no apologies. Take all the time you need. You don't need to hold anything back, Diana, and you don't need to tell me a thing if you aren't ready to."

"No, I do—that is, I am," said Diana, blowing her nose into the handkerchief. "I'm sorry, Leah, I just—"

"Diana Hann, I swear to you by this black and horrid tree that if you apologise to me once more, I will scream."

Diana giggled once again. *My God, how did I even survive this long without a friend like Leah by my side?*

The two women sat side by side beneath the bare branches of the old sentinel. The rolling countryside they could glimpse from this vista was entirely different than what Diana had seen that morning, looking entirely more grim and funereal beneath the endless silver clouds. Yet, she could not deny that she already felt better, having unleashed the demons that had howled inside her mind day and night for nearly a month.

After several quiet minutes of watching the whispering rain, Diana did finally begin to speak. Once she started, much like her endless tears, there was no stopping the flow of words. She told Leah the whole bloody story of the previous weeks, from when Mister Arnold had accompanied her to this house to her first dreadful night of grief to

the weeks of shouting matches and broken dishes.

She held back only her most recent interactions with Colin Mullens, which still struck her not as shameful exactly, but as too personal to share even with Leah. All the while, the rain blew to and fro, strengthened and dissolved into vapour.

“... And that’s all there is to it,” said Diana by way of a dejected conclusion. “Before long, I will be married off to Mister Dunn or whichever buyer offers Uncle James the most affordable price. I expect I shall be allowed one last foray out into the world as I am carted from this prison to the next, where I shall spend the rest of my miserable days in the birthing bed.”

Her story finished, Diana felt as though she could sleep for a thousand years now; her limbs, her head, even her eyelids felt unbearably heavy. Just the previous morning, she had hoped inviting Leah might point her in the direction of her deliverance from this hell she was trapped in. Now, even the act of speaking felt like a herculean task.

Perhaps it would be better just to accept what fate has in store for me, Diana mused in the silence that filled the summer air. I haven’t the strength to go on fighting much longer. Surely I can find some measure of tranquillity in whatever Uncle James means to do with me. With a bit of luck, I may catch an illness and secure my final rest before much longer, anyway. Her eyes flickered up to the ominous black branch of the tree above her, and Diana instantly regretted wishing such a thing, even within her own mind.

“Let me make sure I have all that clear in my mind.”

Looking over, Diana could see Leah sitting with her legs out straight,

her fingers toying idly with a blade of grass and tingeing her fingers green. Diana gave a weak smile; she could remember Leah doing this same thing when they were girls, every time they were contemplating some difficult problem or predicament.

“Your uncle is your undisputed legal guardian and will remain so until you are married,” said Leah thoughtfully. Diana nodded. “You suspect he is stealing from your inheritance to enrich himself and will do so right until your wedding, though you have no proof of such. You also believe he does not have your best interests at heart and means to give you away in marriage as soon as possible without any regard for your wishes or your future security. Do I have all that correct?”

It all sounded so final, so inevitable when she heard it summarised aloud. Diana nodded limply, casting another almost longing look towards the branch above her. *Bereft of other options, perhaps there is still one more choice I may make for myself ...*

With a relieved laugh, Leah shook her head and flashed Diana a smile of reassurance. “That’s all, then! Well, that sounds simple enough.”

Diana blinked. The words were strange, incomprehensible somehow. “What ...?”

“Come now, Diana. It’s the simplest thing in the world! What you’re describing is a monstrous injustice, and of course, we shan’t stand for it!”

“We shan’t?” she asked in a timid voice.

“Of course not! Thieving from a poor orphaned girl, selling her off to a wicked suitor? Why, that’s the stuff of the worst villains in literature—no, in the world! I tell you, Diana, we won’t stand for this.” Leah squeezed Diana’s shoulder, jostling her roughly, and Diana could not help smiling at the reassuring gesture. “Now, just tell me how I can help, and we’ll have this battle won before Sir James knows what’s what!”

The life drained from Diana’s face again. “I ... I don’t know. I’d hoped—that is, I wanted ...” Darkness gathered at the edges of her vision, threatening to envelope her in a dead faint. *How on Earth did I expect Leah to help me if I haven’t the faintest idea what to do myself?* she thought, feeling a crushing weight fall onto her shoulders.

“No plan, eh? You haven’t any idea what I can do to help, have you, you poor girl?” Leah sighed with a bitterness that was almost enough to throw Diana into a fit of tears once more. She stopped this in place by embracing Diana again, pulling her close and patting her head gently. “Dear, dear Diana. This all must be even worse than I imagined. You really aren’t yourself these days, are you?”

Diana shook her head wordlessly, hoping she was not soiling Leah’s shoulder with tears or mucus.

“Well, lucky for you, I hear the old Diana Hann isn’t far off. She’s exactly the sort of person I would turn to in a case like this.”

“Really?” Diana croaked.

“Without a doubt! The old Diana Hann certainly wouldn’t allow such injustice to continue unabated. She would concoct a plan of action, then follow the most reasonable steps to resolve this situation.”

“But I don’t know what to do, Leah! How am I to follow the most reasonable steps if I don’t know how to—”

Leah shushed Diana once again, an unbothered look of confidence on her face beneath her coppery curls. “There are a thousand possible avenues through which you could fight this, and I’ve some ideas as to which might be best. I’ll tell you more about that in a minute, but as it happens, the first steps are the same no matter which road you take. Just sit quiet and rest for a minute—you listen to what your friend has to say, now that apparently I’m the more capable one of the two of us.”

Diana snorted. “Don’t get too used to it.” She chuckled, then allowed herself to fall silent. The rain had stopped, leaving only the sound of her own heartbeat and the sound of Leah sifting through her ideas in a steady, soothing voice.

* * *

It was remarkable what a world of difference a few hours could make. Since the sun had risen that morning, Diana had descended into the blackest pits of despair and been carried aloft on wings of hope. It had happened so often, in fact, that she felt as though she had been forced through a bellows. Indeed, she found herself yawning mightily as she came back into the Leeson house after bidding her fond farewell to Leah.

Still, weary though she was, her mind was clear with what she needed to do if she was to take back her destiny from her wicked guardian. Until she was presented with an opportunity to formulate and execute a more complete plan, Leah had said, all Diana needed to do was keep

herself while following two simple steps.

Step one: delay Uncle James' plans somehow, whatever they may be.

This one had seemed as sensible as anything to Diana, enough so that she realised she had already been pursuing this step for some time, albeit in a haphazard, poorly planned way. Even if he did not need her consent to betroth her to any man of his choosing, she did not have to make it easy for him.

She could feign illness, perhaps, or scream bloody murder in front of any prospective suitors to drive them away, though Leah had impressed on her the importance of saving any shouting matches for the last resort so as not to provoke Uncle James into rash action. *Whatever it takes*, she thought with her teeth gritted, *I will make him fight tooth and nail to get me to acquiesce to his wishes.*

Unfortunately, the second step proved to be a bit trickier to get her mind around, though it seemed just as sensible as the first.

Step two: collect any information you can about Uncle James and his dealings.

Diana trudged numbly down the corridor, ignoring the looks or pleasantries she elicited in the members of the household staff who passed her way. In all the days she had been under Sir James' care, she had rarely known him to be careless with his business dealings and certainly not with anything related to her position.

She had spotted an iron chest in his study, one that she assumed held

all the man's important papers, and for all his braggadocio and posturing, James Leeson was remarkably closemouthed about the nature of his business affairs ... at least, in Diana's earshot. He closed the door to his study whenever he was entertaining one of his slimy colleagues and had irately shushed her anytime Diana had enquired after the status of her legal documents or her parents' will.

How in heaven's name am I to learn anything about what Uncle James is doing if I am shut out of all his business?

As fortune would have it, the answer came to Diana while she was en route to retiring to her room. Climbing the steps of the back staircase, she heard low-pitched echoes that sounded almost like human speech. She looked around herself fearfully, unsure if she was being watched or spoken to, but all she could detect was a faint, sour aroma of tobacco and sweat. After a moment, she realised the sound was coming down from the top of the staircase. Pausing to listen more closely, Diana found that she could soon recognize distinct words among the susurrus.

"... business last month. I'll thank you not to bring it up again, in my presence or elsewhere."

That is Uncle James' voice, beyond a doubt! thought Diana with a rush of excitement. Looking upward and trying to piece together a mental map of the confounding old house, she guessed that though she tended to take the grand stairs upstairs whenever she was summoned to see Uncle James, his study must be right at the top of this servants' staircase.

She cupped an ear and inclined her head towards the source of the noise, but whoever was speaking to Uncle James had a softer voice, and his reply was nothing more than a distant rumble. Uncle James, on the other hand, was now raising his voice in anger as he was so

wont to do.

“Of course I bloody well wish you’d leave the country! But we both know that’s the worst thing you can do right now. Especially as I may need you again.”

Whatever he’s speaking about, he sounds positively frantic. Diana’s eyes narrowed, her mind racing at what could affect such a state in the man. *Sounds like bloody business, whatever it is. If only I could hear the other side of the conversation ...* She crept up the stairs as silently as she could, past the landing that led to the corridor beside her room, moving on her hands and knees to keep her shoes from squeaking on the polished stone.

“... of my sight, Bertrand. Not after your drink, I tell you—right now, this instant. Don’t come around here again until I send for you, or I’ll hire someone else next time, and for two jobs instead of one.”

There was a soft click of glass, then footsteps. They sounded not more than twenty yards away, just above her head and down the hall. Diana froze, her blood shot through with ice. When she heard the scratch of oak and the soft squeal of metal hinges, she waited no longer, flying down the stairs and sailing into her room as she pushed open her door and closed it behind her in one fluid motion.

Diana threw herself into her freshly made bed, curling up and facing the wall to feign sleep, though it struck her as a ridiculously childish manoeuvre. *Did Uncle James hear me? Did the man he was talking to – that Bertrand? They must have done; I was too careless, came too close!*

She dared not open her mouth to breathe, though her heart was pounding hard enough she feared she might burst. Finally, after an

eternity passed, and Diana heard nothing but the rumble of her heart, she lay back in the bed and breathed deeply in relief.

I have my answer, then, she thought as she gazed up at the ceiling—on the other side of which was the floor of her abhorrent guardian's study, she decided. *Delay his plans and gather information by listening at his study whenever possible.*

Thanks to Leah and a little luck, she had her plan of action. Now all she needed was the resolve to carry it out ... and the strength of will to steady the thundering of her heartbeat.

Chapter 11

Feathers of Another Bird

By all rights, it should have been one of the happiest days Diana Hann could have hoped for. The weather was bright and fair, the air warm but not uncomfortable. For the first time in more than a month, she had been allowed out into the world and away from the oppressive atmosphere of the Leeson house. And here, amid the thrilling, unapologetic life of Spitalfields Market, Diana felt herself reassured by the sights and sounds and smells of other human beings going about their own tumultuous lives.

There was just one problem.

“Here, ah, Miss Hann. That is, if you would just slow your pace for a moment, I—excuse me, sir, pardon me—Miss Hann?”

“Wait there, Miss Diana, we’re coming! Lord have mercy, Mister Dunn, my old bones don’t move as good as they used to.

Diana closed her eyes and drew in a breath. *If I keep my eyes closed, I can imagine I am here all by myself, if only for one precious second.*

“Ah, there you are,” said Gerard Dunn, stumbling as he reached Diana through the throng of Londoners. His dun-coloured hair was a tangled mess, and he was out of breath even though Diana had not succeeded in getting more than thirty yards away from him. “I’m sorry, I, uh ... I don’t know how we got separated, Miss Hann. Are you all—that is,

don't fear, ah, Miss Hann. I'm here right beside you."

"Thank goodness. For a moment, I thought I had lost you. How terrible that would have been," Diana grumbled in a deadpan voice.

"I must say, I'll have to have a word with Sir James," Missus Fessler huffed, smoothing her skirts. "I'm getting too old for athletics like this, chaperone or no."

"Perhaps you should stay home next time, then. In fact, perhaps we all should," said Diana, turning to continue her quick walk back into the crowd.

Not for the first time, she wished she had not resolved to go along with Uncle James' mandated chaperoned walk with Gerard. When he had told her she would be spending her day walking through the market with her 'beloved beau', Diana had nearly pitched a bloody fit on the spot.

It would have been so much easier and more tolerable to tell him I would rather die than spend another afternoon with Mister Dull, as she had begun thinking of Gerard. More satisfying as well, certainly. But regrettably, for the first time in some weeks, her good sense had won out—or her fear. Uncle James had made it good and clear that he was eager for an excuse to sign her off to Gerard Dunn that very afternoon, that it was only concern for his own reputation that compelled him to make her go along with this sham of a courtship. And the look in his eye had convinced Diana that he was deadly serious.

Calm yourself, her good sense had seethed. You can survive a boring afternoon. Present an icy front rather than a fiery one, and he will lose interest. Give yourself more time to understand Uncle James' plan and

concoct one of your own.

“Here, Miss Hann! I say, have you seen these, ah ... things?”

Diana gritted her teeth still harder, hoping she would not have a horrendous headache when this was all finished. She turned slowly to see Gerard Dunn pointing to a spray of peacock feathers in a vendor’s stall. They were pretty enough in their own way, Diana supposed, if a bit well-worn from being pawed at by a thousand well-heeled nincompoops over the years.

“I have now, thank you,” she said sharply, then turned to continue pushing forward. *The carriage can’t be much further ...*

“Wait, ah, I mean ...” She could hear Gerard chide himself to finish a sentence for a change, see the levers and pulleys moving behind his eyes trying to. “Don’t you think they’re ... that is, they *are* ... well, quite pretty. I suppose?”

“Indeed, most lovely, sir, the feathers of the exotic peacock bird!” chirruped the vendor as he sidled closer to Gerard.

“Yes, yes. Uh, I know that, yes.” Gerard’s teeth chattered as he looked to Diana, then glanced about awkwardly. He swallowed something before turning back to Diana and saying in as deliberate voice as he possessed, “Might I have the honour of giving you one, Miss Hann? Or several? If it would not be too forward, that is. You could use them, you know, for ... writing your correspondence!”

“I’m afraid not, honoured sir,” said the vendor with a sad shake of his

head, his jowls shaking with the gesture. "These lovelies are only for appreciating for their aesthetic value, you see. Grown by the peacock for attracting one of the females of his species, who find them most alluring." The greasy man waggled his eyebrows suggestively at Gerard.

Diana snorted. "Perhaps you should try giving them to a peahen, then. I imagine she would be a more appreciative recipient."

All she got in return was an empty blink from Gerard. He opened his mouth to laugh, then shut it once more with a look of furious concentration on his plain features. "Miss Hann, I don't think the bird would ... why would I give a present to a bird?" he asked in a slow voice, as though speaking to a small child.

Idiot, Diana thought as she walked off again, immediately wondering whether she was referring to Gerard or herself for expecting anything different from him. *Better re-learn how to hold your tongue, foolish girl. One complaint to Uncle James about your behaviour might be enough to scare him into doing God knows what. You've got too used to your verbal warfare with Colin Mullens. Most people aren't like that—in fact, nobody else in the world is like that.*

Diana stopped in place there, her breath catching in her throat. Over the preceding weeks, she had grown exceedingly practised at telling the difference between the varying shades of sorrow ... but now, the thoughts that had been running through her mind presented a vexing question.

Am I feeling upset due to Uncle James' nefarious plots? Or am I upset that Gerard Dunn is not Colin Mullens?

The carriage ride back to the Leeson household was an even more awkward affair, though such a thing hardly seemed possible. Someone had evidently given Mister Dunn the advice that it was for him to take the reins in a conversation with a member of the fairer sex and that despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Diana was just a shy girl who could not hold up her end of a conversation.

And so, each time he stumbled and stammered his way to a question or another natural opening in the conversation, he stopped, thought better of it, and continued nattering on about whatever trivial thing entered his own head.

And my God, even for trivial chitchat, this is especially trivial.

“I’m not sure I approve of the wild colours you see some women wearing out in the street. They may be, er, fashionable, I suppose, but they are most gaudy. Don’t you think they ... that is, I’m sure you would never want to attract attention in such a manner.”

And, “It’s most upsetting, the stray curs you see running around at night. Not ... not that I spend a great deal of time on the street at night, ha ha!”

And, “I know many women are quite fond of riding these days. Do you like to—that is, if you are permitted to visit, I shall have to show you our stables.”

This was followed by an impossible ten minutes in which Gerard Dunn

described his childhood pony in every excruciating detail, seemingly without taking a single breath.

Ignoring the gentle elbow that Missus Fessler threw into her ribs every so often, Diana continued to stare out the carriage window, avoiding Gerard's gaze so she could continue to roll her eyes. *If Missus Fessler knew how much it would hurt to look at the man, she would bloody well leave my ribs alone.* Rising from the irritated air that had descended on Diana was the voice of her good sense, insistent if increasingly quiet.

You should be using this time to figure out how you can get out from under Uncle James' thumb, said the voice. *This is a valuable opportunity to think through what you've learned about his designs for you. Perhaps you can even use Mister Dull—Dunn, that is, to your advantage. All you need to do is concentrate!*

She opened her mouth in a vigorous yawn, the sights of the city through her carriage window blurring into one long, endless grey streak even as the sound of Mister Dunn's voice melted into a boundless tedium of noise.

I am falling asleep, Diana thought with a start, pulling herself straight from her position leaning against the window. *Can't have that—not now. Wake yourself, girl, come on!*

Sleep continued to be a fraught and terrible thing for Diana. Every night she awoke in the darkness a dozen times or more, crying out for her parents or shrieking as a hail of shattered glass tore into her flesh. Naturally, this lack of restful slumber left her nodding off in all manner of inconvenient places ... and worse still, the dreams of blood and glass were even more terrifying when they visited her in the daylight.

She blinked, looking over and seeing that the gentle, rhythmic jostling of the carriage had sent Missus Fessler into a deep slumber. Her mouth was hanging open, her soft snoring added to the soporific atmosphere of the carriage. Diana rubbed her eyes, hoping to jolt herself back into wakefulness, and saw that Mister Dunn had likewise fallen asleep at some point. She smiled grimly at the sight, grateful that she would at least be spared more of his dull attempts at conversation.

Thank goodness for small favours, I suppose.

When the carriage lurched to a stop in front of the Leesons' house, Diana was already rising to launch herself through the carriage door. She strode briskly to the house's front entrance, paying no heed to the confused, half-asleep calls she heard from the carriage occupants behind her.

Mister Dull can see himself home from here, she thought, her mood having progressed from mere irritation to a black rage. I have seen through the visit to the market as ordered; I see no reason to entertain this farce a moment longer.

"Well, isn't that a lovely picture! It's always a pleasure to see an elegant young lady in such high spirits."

Diana spun on her heel, seeing Colin skulking in the same shadowy room from which he had first ambushed her. She started, suddenly realising the wrathful expression she wore on her face, and this only served to amuse Colin further.

"Why, I don't think I've ever seen you in such a good temper, Miss

Hann. Or as much of a temper, at least.” He smirked, walking closer to her with his finger between two pages of the book he carried in his hand. “You must have had a very nice time indeed. I can only imagine how refreshing it must be to spend the afternoon with a dull young man after listening to nothing but my fascinating prattle day after day.”

“Don’t,” Diana said, raising a finger in Colin’s face. *I suffer through all your cretinous jokes about every topic in the world*, she wanted to add. *Don’t you dare mock me about this rotten business that I only suffer through because of your damnable stepfather.* But she did not get the chance to fully give voice to this thought.

“Hullo, what have we here?” Colin regarded Gerard as he approached the front door, a wary look on his face. “That’s right, Mister Haven’t-Had-The-Pleasure, isn’t it? Or was it *Sir* Pleasure?”

Diana could not help turning to watch Gerard Dunn’s reaction to this greeting. For the first time, his face was creased with something that resembled genuine anger, albeit still coloured with the same confusion he had shown her every time she had made a joke in his presence. “Gerard Dunn,” he said simply, giving Colin a stiff bow. “And I am to understand you are Sir James Leeson’s half-son, then?”

“Stepson,” Diana corrected quietly. *What in the world is a ‘half-son’?*

“I’ve been called far worse, I confess,” said Colin, ambling over to look Gerard Dunn up and down carefully. “If you’re wondering, the difference is that unlike a bastard—or ‘*half-son*,’ as you say—whose very presence is a matter of scandal, a stepson needs to actually do something fractious to provoke a fight in his household.” He gave Diana a roguish wink. “Which explains why I try so very hard to be so pleasant all the time, I suppose.”

Diana grunted and rolled her eyes, stifling the laughter that bloomed in her breast. She pushed to move past Colin towards the stairs, knowing that if she did not immediately remove herself from the situation, she would be drawn into another endless quarrel with Colin. And even if this would be enjoyable, she was too angry with him, with Gerard Dunn, with Uncle James to surrender her foul mood so easily.

“Ah, I see you’ve acquired some more shiny objects with which to build your nest.” Diana followed Colin’s eye to the cluster of peacock feathers poking out from under her arm beside her unused parasol. *Mister Dull must have purchased them and tucked them in with my things without my noticing*, she thought with a scowl, an expression that only served to tickle Colin even more. Missus Fessler excused herself, coughing to disguise the laughter that shook her stout form.

“Well done, Miss Hann, an excellent purchase.” He laughed into his hand. “I have no doubt you’ll soon attract yourself a handsome mate in no time at all. A robin, perhaps, or some other similarly bird-witted thing?”

“Why should I need to make the effort when clearly I already cannot keep such creatures away?” Diana quipped. She felt her face grow warm with embarrassment—now she was insulting Gerard Dunn right in front of his face! *Damn this Colin Mullens; he simply brings out my worst impulses every time I see him!*

Fortunately, Gerard Dunn did not seem to appreciate the implications of Diana’s words. “I, ah ... these were a gift. For Miss Hann,” he said sternly to Colin, holding his shoulders aloft in what seemed intended as an intimidating posture.

Colin barely glanced in Dunn’s direction long enough to arch an

eyebrow before returning eagerly to his banter with Diana. "I've just an idea: a talking parrot!" he crowed, snapping his fingers. "I often saw such things in my travels in Spain, you know. Most entertaining, those parrots. They can be trained to say three or four phrases, at which point further training is impossible, and the birds can't be shut up for love or money. The same effect as a husband, really, with only slightly more mess."

"As if there really needs to be any more talking going on in my company." Diana smiled, feeling herself slide comfortably back into the rhythm of battle. "A week with me, and I'll talk any avian husband back into the jungle, if not the grave."

Colin nodded sagely. "Ah, that's true, I suppose. Though unlike a human swain, a parrot can be used to make yourself a nice hat when you're finished with it."

"Miss Hann, are you—" Gerard began to say, leaning between the duelling couple.

But by now, Diana had been drawn entirely into the battle. "Why should I have any need of a parrot when I cannot seem to rid myself of this mockingbird?" she asked, arms akimbo and scowling furiously at Colin. "His song may be sweet, but it does grate on the nerves after eight or ten hours."

"Mockingbird?" Colin looked around in mock confusion. "All I see is an overstuffed chicken."

"You might want to try looking in the mirror, Mister Mullens. Though you may not like what you see there, it's no prize foul; I can tell you that."

“To think, wasting all this time with chickens when you would be better appreciated by a cockerel.”

“Oh, a proud, strutting cockerel? A bird so in love with his own appearance that he does little but preen and complain all day?” Diana laughed. “Yes, I can see why you might have some affection for such a creature.”

Colin burst into self-conscious laughter at this last remark—Diana had landed a blow on him at last. Feeling herself grow warm with pride, she glanced over to Gerard Dunn, who was continuing to stare at them with a look of blank, distressed confusion on his face. He was frozen like a statue, eyes wide, looking afraid to breathe.

It's cruel to let him continue to suffer like this, protested Diana's good sense. And for once, she heeded this counsel.

“Thank you for a lovely afternoon jaunt. Good day, Mister Dunn,” she said, curtseying politely. She turned to Colin and repeated the gesture. “Mister Mullens.” And before she could be drawn into any other outrageous behaviour, she ascended the stairs, feeling two sets of eyes watching her intently as she disappeared from their view.

Chapter 12

The Man Beneath the Mask

Diana was not entirely sure when or how it came to pass that she and Colin Mullens developed a routine with one another. Since their first walk that carried them to the ominous walnut tree, however, the two had broken their fast together early every morning, then went out for a walk in the gardens or the Leeson woods. Even when the rain fell in a sad, steady stream from the London sky, they carried umbrellas and had just as entertaining a morning in the mud and mire.

Their interactions had not become any warmer than previously; indeed, Diana steadily got the impression Colin was always trying to push her to greater heights of pique with ever more outrageous jibes and cutting remarks, ones she was only too happy to return in kind. Yet none of it contained even a whisper of ill will, she sensed, and by the time they returned to the Leeson house to continue with the rest of their day, her sides were aching from all the laughter they had shared in the morning.

Over time Diana had begun to make the acquaintance of someone she had not even suspected might exist. Now and then, after many hours of talking and laughing and sniping at one another, Colin would let slip the mask of confident bravado and show her what lay beneath. The conversation would roam to a subject about which he had a keen interest, and his laughter and sarcasm would evaporate, leaving an excitable, even shy young man.

Or they would touch on more serious subjects such as Diana's tragic circumstances, and Colin's feelings of sympathy would radiate from him palpably. Each time she saw this side of Colin, she would grow quiet, attentive, cautious; she did not want to startle this Colin

Mullens away as she might a lovely bird that had hesitantly sneaked out from the foliage to allow its beauty to be glimpsed.

At the same time, Diana caught sight of another elusive creature she had almost lost entirely: herself. Ever since Leah had pointed out that the old Diana was all but buried under layers of anger and resentment, she found she was constantly watching herself for the qualities she associated with herself—her true self, that is. She monitored her words and deeds carefully for any hint of kindness, liveliness, even fun ... yet she saw neither hide nor hair of this erstwhile Diana. Not when she was lying in her little bed and gazing up at the shadowy ceiling, not when she was skulking in the staircase to listen to Uncle James' plotting, not when she was biting her tongue to remain silent at yet another painful family meal.

The only exception, she realised late one sleepless night, came when she was in Colin Mullens' company. She never felt herself having fun any longer except when sparring with Colin. And it was true that the man inspired her to acts of petty sarcasm or ill-temper that embarrassed her when she later reflected on them ... but whenever she was lucky enough to catch a sight of the man beneath the mask? Those were the moments she felt herself fill with the kindness and empathy that she had carried for so long as a treasured part of herself.

But why? she asked the darkness above her bed. *What is it about this rascal who inspires me to find what I care most about in myself?*

If the shadows that hung high in the rafters had any answer, they did not speak it that night or any night.

After two weeks of this routine continuing as it had, Diana and Colin found themselves walking deeper into the Leeson woods than she had ever been. The weather was hot and sticky, and her dress clung to her form as her skin grew slick with perspiration. As expected, Colin did not miss an opportunity to lash out with gentle jokes at her difficulty navigating the rough, dusty path ... and when he got his thick brown curls snarled in a low-hanging branch, Diana laughed long and loud right back at him.

At some point, Diana heard the sound of running water, and when she enquired about it, Colin led her to a little stream that crossed the very back of the estate's grounds. The air was thick with insects flitting through the collage of shadows painted on the rocky ground by the thousands of verdant leaves overhead.

"I'm afraid it's not an *especially* good place to go for a swim," Colin said with a laugh, kicking at the clear water and demonstrating its shallow depth. "Not that I haven't tried, over the years."

"As if I would disgrace myself by bathing in front of a creature like you," said Diana with an acerbic smile. She breathed in deeply through her nose, enjoying the clean, clear smell of the place. "But it is a bit cooler here by the water, all the same. I'm grateful you led us here."

With a surge of energy, Colin leapt onto a broad, flat rock that lay in the middle of the stream. Diana half-expected it would shift and send him tumbling into the water, but his footing was sure, his muscles holding himself precisely in position atop the rock, arms spread for balance. He looked to her with a very self-satisfied expression, tangled dark hair framing his face winningly, and Diana was quick to erase the impressed look from her face.

He pointed into the distance, past the other bank of the stream. "If

you look there, you can see an old wooden fence. That's the edge of my stepfather's land."

"Who owns what's on the other side?"

"An old farmer? The crown? A coven of woods witches?" Colin shrugged. "In nearly twenty years, I've never seen anyone past the fence."

With another agile vault, Colin was back on the near side of the river. He sat roughly on an old log near the water, half-buried in dirt and with a mass of ancient roots splaying out in all directions. Colin withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away the sweat from his forehead, and then dabbed it along his neck. Through the low, loose neckline of his white linen shirt, Diana could see a thin covering of curly brown hair.

His eyes met hers, and he jerked his head towards an open place on the log near him. Before she could turn him down with a cynical comment, she had accepted his offer and was seated on the log. The two sat in silence for a long while, savouring the gentle rhythm of the water lapping at the banks of the stream just in front of them.

"So this is the place at the Leeson house that's as far as one can get from James Leeson," Diana said finally in a quiet voice.

Colin grunted. "Why do you think I spent so much of my childhood out here?"

Diana looked to him in shock at this proclamation, and he loosed a

warm yet dark laugh. “Are you really so surprised? Don’t misunderstand my feelings; Sir James Leeson is more than my stepfather. He is my mentor, my hero. I would be nothing if it were not for him.”

“For his money, you mean.”

“Yes,” Colin said simply, surprising Diana for the second time in as many minutes. “That was important, without question. But he has also shown me generosity in many other ways. He did not have to marry my mother, and even once he did, no one in the world would blame him for treating me like an interloper in his house.”

“I think I can imagine what that might feel like ...” muttered Diana glumly. Though she did not look up, she could sense Colin looking at her with that elusive sincerity peeking out from behind his mask.

“I know.” He sighed heavily. “I may idolise the man, but I’m not bloody blind. Even if he rarely treated me how he treats you, I have always known in some fashion that he is capable of such behaviour. The man has a temper and a clear vision of how the world ought to be. That is no great sin.”

Diana’s mind raced with all the recollections of raised voices, barked orders, broken dishes. *You would not have the same perspective were you fully reliant on him for your future, Mister Mullens*, she thought, clenching her jaw tightly.

“Anyway, that’s *not* what he did,” Colin said, his voice rising in intensity. “Treat me like a stranger, I mean. The man has raised me as his own son, has brought me up in the world as best as he is able. My mother and I were penniless, destitute, and he brought us in and

shared all of his bounty with us both without asking for a cent of it to be repaid. He is not an easy man to like, perhaps, but he is a good person at heart.”

Colin’s final syllable hung over the water for a long while, trickling through the ripples of the stream until washed away into silence. A dark cloud passed overhead, then melted away under the searing heat of the summer sun.

I had no idea Colin’s mother was in such a ruinous financial situation before she married Uncle James. I did not think the man capable of any act of kindness to another, especially where money is involved, Diana thought to herself, watching the insects play in the stream’s cool spray. Then her expression hardened, remembering how eager he seemed to be to hang onto her parents’ fortune. *He worsened with time, then; most people do. One kind act does not excuse abuse of a guardianship years after the fact.*

“As you say,” Diana grumbled, unable to say anything else. Her imagination happily supplied a thousand invectives she could level at the man he was so eager to defend, but somehow she did not feel in the mood to utter any of them. *What would be the point? His mind is clearly made up,* she told herself, looking for an explanation for her own silence.

And on and on the silence stretched, the sun cutting a brilliant arc across the sky and stretching the shadows of the woods from one bank to the next. Diana shifted in place, idly wondering whether her pale blue dress, one of her favourites, would be stained with mud or merely dusty when they rose from this scenic if uncomfortable perch.

“I can scarcely remember my father.”

She looked askance at Colin. His face was stoic, his mask firmly in place, but the words hung between them in the warm summer air.

“My true father, I mean, who sired me. He died when I was still very young—not so young as that, really, seven years old. People remember plenty of things from that age, but I can recall very little before coming to this house.” Colin breathed out a heavy sigh, kicking his feet idly over the side of the log. “There are times when I feel I’ve done something terribly wrong by forgetting so much of him, as though I should have held more tightly onto those memories. But whatever the reason, there just isn’t much there.”

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply through his nose as he craned his head back. “I wish I could say that I miss him. I think that I do, from time to time. But I am haunted by my uncertainty about it.” Colin’s eyes fluttered open, and when he looked at Diana, they were red, pained, inhabited by something terrible.

“I would trade places with you in an instant,” Diana said, her gaze fixed on those piercing green eyes. She saw them narrow, uncertain about what he had just heard, and she saw everything turn misty as tears sprang to her eyes.

She continued in an even voice, still keeping her eyes locked on his. “I mean it, Colin. You are a very fortunate man not to miss your father.”

Colin looked away and snorted—a startlingly immature gesture from someone who had always been so thoroughly composed in her presence. “I cannot say I feel very fortunate.”

“You are, though. It is a terrible, *awful* thing to miss somebody like

this. There are times when I miss my parents so terribly, when the pain is so tremendous that I feel sure I will die. I wake up in the middle of the night from yet another nightmare of my parents' death, and I feel my heart pounding so hard ... I am so convinced that all I can do is wait for the Reaper to come for me any moment. I ready myself for this world, this pain to end. And it does, at some point, but never for very long."

Diana stopped, her words turning to ash in her mouth. "I would give anything for them to be alive again—my own life, even. You don't know how many nights I prayed for just that. But after weeks of praying for them, eventually, all I could do was begin to pray for myself. I pray I will stop missing them, selfish as it sounds. I pray I will stop feeling the way I do before it truly is the death of me. I pray that ..."

Diana stopped, choking herself off before she could give voice to the words that had formed in her mind. *Lord, what am I doing? I cannot confide in a man like this—in any man or woman in the world!*

She felt something warm brush against her hand, looked up in surprise. Colin was resting his hand atop hers. His eyes sparkled with gentle encouragement, his mask completely absent. Diana sniffed and felt her lips speak the words.

"I pray I will never be loved by another," she whispered. "Not by anyone. I pray that when my death comes, it will not do to anyone what my parents' death has done to me. Because no one, *no one*, no matter how wicked, deserves to feel like this."

She immediately regretted giving voice to this most private of fears. Diana closed her eyes, tensed her muscles in preparation for what was to come. Colin was sure to loose a biting remark or perhaps just laugh at her. *Lord knows I am being ridiculously maudlin enough to warrant*

laughter. I just hope he does not push me into the stream before running back to the house to repeat everything I've just told him to his stepfather.

But that wasn't what happened. Instead, something strange transpired: Colin's hand wrapped around her own and squeezed, his fingers interlaced with hers. His hand felt so much larger than hers and so warm. Together their eyes fell back on the ceaselessly flowing stream, and they listened to the summer song.

Chapter 13

Unmistakable

Summer in London was always a surprise to Diana. For every year she could remember since she was very small, it always seemed that the fall came crashing in far sooner than she had expected. Just as she had persuaded her parents to let her indulge in some of summer's pleasures—to take her to play in the Serpentine or out for a walk in the woods, or even to the seaside once—then overnight the weather was the cold and rainy gloom of autumn.

This was precisely what had transpired the night of the second Leeson dinner party: the guests had departed from their homes in other fashionable parts of London in their most fashionable thin summer garments, only to arrive at Sir James Leeson's magnificent mansion shivering cold and sopping wet. Even those guests whose servants had had sufficient foresight to bring umbrellas were soaked by the time they had walked from their carriage to the front door; the wind was so violent and unpredictable.

From her vantage point at the first-storey window of her bedroom, Diana had ample opportunity to sit and reflect on how starkly things had changed of late. And for once, the change was a pleasant one: where every other surprise August burst of rainy weather had depressed her for days, even weeks, today she found her mind as sunny as the exterior was tempestuous.

Indeed, as the storm clouds had gathered over the previous hour, Diana had sung a little song to herself while getting dressed to go down to the dinner party. The rain had lashed against the window and Missus Fessler had toddled in to light the fire, full of complaints as usual, but Diana herself had greeted the maid sweetly and smiled at

her reflection while brushing her hair.

As her eye landed on her carefree smile, though, Diana put down the hairbrush, stricken by a terrible thought. *Feeling this happy means I am capable of being hurt again*, she thought, swallowing hard. *It means I have something that I do not wish to lose. Would fortune be cruel enough to give me happiness only so it could be taken away again?*

However, today her prayers seemed to be answered, as her happy, light-hearted mood returned not long after this moment. What's more, it followed her not only down the stairs but through a dozen greetings and half a dozen polite conversations.

Which is not to say that none of the storm clouds had managed to mar her horizon even within the walls of James Leeson's house. There was the great knight himself. The tall, imposing man was all spit and bluster this evening, and the second he had caught sight of Diana coming down the stairs, he had lurched in her direction with his moustache already brimming with complaints and commands.

Fortunately, by now, Diana had become most practised at slipping away from Uncle James before he could unleash his wrath upon her, a task made considerably easier tonight by the dozen supplicants who swarmed the man at every step. She met his eyes and saw the daggers he stared in her direction, but she was able to scamper out of the salon into the corridor with only a victorious smirk in his direction.

Her next obstacle was nearly as irritating, if far less imposing: Gerard Dunn, his hair carefully if not artfully arranged on his too-big head, stood alone with a glass of wine in the corridor. Diana clapped eyes on him before he seemed to have noticed her, though she saw him looking around with great concern on his simple face.

Just as he turned to look at her, she spun to face a pair of old lords in idle conversation by the portrait of Sir James, excused herself loudly as though she had been speaking with them, and turned to walk away from Gerard as quickly as her feet would carry her.

Another reprieve, thought Diana as she breathed a sigh of relief. Though that's most of the house barred to me for the moment. Surely there must be someone safe to whom I can turn for reasonable conversation. Colin must be around somewhere, or perhaps Mister and Missus Arnold were invited once more, or—

“Well, *there* you are!” Leah laughed, taking Diana by the hand and giving her a distant, polite embrace. “I thought you lived in this house, yet I could not seem to find you anywhere when Mother and I arrived. I met Sir James and that awful Gerard Dunn, but you were nowhere to be found.”

“Perhaps because you were looking for me in the vicinity of Sir James and that awful Gerard Dunn.” Diana giggled. “Come on; we can talk over here. Colin showed me a little library on this floor that’s out of the way enough to—”

“*Colin?*” Leah repeated teasingly, a look of shock on her face. Lady Westermont glared over at them from the corner where she had been making polite conversation with Leah’s mother.

Diana winced. “Mister Mullens, I mean. Come on, just follow me.” She took her friend’s hand and led her down a nearby winding corridor, feeling her cheeks heat as though she had just been burned. Leah allowed herself to be dragged into the cosy little library, giggling lightly all the while.

“Here, you see?” said Diana as she gestured to the comfortable-looking sofas that surrounded a low table of dark wood. “Everything we could want in a place to giggle and gossip to our hearts’ content and without having to fear any of Sir James’ guests listening in or interrupting.” Diana scowled as she reached for the sideboard to pour them each a glass of sherry; she was aware that she was nattering on too much to distract herself from this nagging feeling of embarrassment and disliked this reaction in herself.

“Lovely, yes,” said Leah, reclining on one of the sofas. “And this is a place that Colin—I do beg your pardon, *Mister Mullens*—has shown you, then?”

Diana handed her a generous portion of amontillado and sat with her own still more generous cupful. “You’ve seen this house, Leah. You can imagine it might take a few decades to learn its ins and outs; there’s no shame in getting some guidance from someone who knows the place better.”

“What else has *Colin* been telling you, then? Showing you any other secluded corners of the house when there is no one else about?” asked Leah with a mischievous grin on her face.

“I’m not sure I know what you’re implying, Leah, but I don’t much appreciate it.”

Leah leaned forward, nearly spilling her wine in her eagerness. Her eyes were alight with amusement that Diana found strangely unnerving. “Come now, Diana. We’ve known each other for most of our lives, haven’t we? There’s no shame in enjoying the company of a handsome young bachelor. Especially when you and he are so clearly well matched for one another in matters intellectual and conversational.”

The pieces had fit together in Diana's mind, but even as she looked at the finished puzzle, she refused to see it in its completeness. She opened her mouth to avow that she had no idea what Leah was talking about, but another voice filled the silence in the library first.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone was ... Miss Hann?"

The two women looked up at the doorway from their positions on the sofas to see two smartly dressed young men stopped midway through entering the library. Diana felt something swell in her breast at the sight of the pair—Adam Radcliffe wore a glittering diamond pin in his tie, and Colin Mullens always cut a dashing figure in his fashionable black coat, no matter how many times she had seen him in the exact same ensemble. On closer examination, she detected an odd, uncomfortable air hanging over Colin and found herself as curious about that as she was eager for her conversation with Leah to be at an end.

"Good evening, Miss Reid," Colin cut in, his voice oddly stiff. "Miss Hann. We will leave the two of you the use of this room. We may only have a few minutes until dinner is served, anyway."

"No, please," said Leah with a crocodilian smile on her face, ignoring the daggers that Diana stared in her direction. She gestured to the unoccupied seats on the other end of the low table that squatted between the two women. "Please, do join us."

Diana's and Colin's protestations came simultaneously. "Leah, I—"

“I’m not sure that—”

“Diana, please, I haven’t yet finished this lovely *apéritif*.” Leah swiftly raised and lowered her glass, which was nearly empty by this point. “Surely you don’t want me to have to endure a stomach-ache, do you?”

Amid a smattering of shrugs and mutters, the men sat in the indicated chairs, sipping their own wine as they made themselves comfortable.

“I say, Miss Reid, I do hope we are as fortunate in our seating arrangement this evening as we were last time,” said Adam Radcliffe, leaning forward in his seat with an eager grin.

Leah gave him a wary smile. “Poor fellow, have you been unable to find anyone to turn you down as thoroughly as our Diana did last time?”

Adam raised his hands in mock surrender. “No, no, Miss Reid, you’ll be happy to know I’ve sworn off women, at least for a time.”

“Not a very long time, if history be our guide,” Colin quipped.

Adam laughed and shook his head ruefully. “It would be longer if women would all stop being so bloody pretty ... begging your pardon, Miss Reid. Still, it is a necessary step, if a lonely one. After a recent unfortunate episode involving a certain—”

He stopped abruptly before he could continue this sentence, halted by a well-placed elbow to the ribs by his friend Colin. He flashed Colin a look of irritation, then rubbed the back of his head and laughed. "Involving a possibly unsavoury situation not fit for mixed company. *Mildly* unsavoury." Adam looked at Colin again, this time with a wolfish smile. "At any rate, Miss Reid, you've naught to fear. I am eager to resume our previous seating positions not to indulge my predatory instincts but to play spectator again to one of the most thrilling evenings of sport to be found in all of London."

Diana frowned. She could see that Colin had a similar expression of confoundedness on his face.

Leah, however, seemed to follow what Adam was saying completely. Nodding her head and smiling broadly, she put in, "Oh, quite! But why limit ourselves to one city? I imagine one could not witness better, cleverer banter anywhere in the whole of Europe."

"Ah, but you see, many Europeans speak French, which gives them a bit of an unfair advantage." Adam laughed.

"Do you think this time Sir James might be so irritated that he might actually explode? The man does seem to hate being any less than the centre of attention."

"We can only hope so. Though I would hate to have another bout interrupted by—"

"What in the world are the two of you talking about?" Diana asked helplessly. A silent exchange of meaningful glances among Leah, Adam, and Colin followed this question. After a tense silence, Leah and Adam broke into laughter while Colin gave an exaggerated shrug

and sipped his wine noisily. Diana could think of nothing else to do than to follow his lead, letting her friend chatter on about whatever it was she and Adam were alluding to.

Ridiculous, I'm sure, Diana thought ruefully. *Whatever it is she thinks she's hit upon, there's no doubt that she's imagining the whole thing. The girl's always been prone to such fantasies, ever since we were young.* She glanced over to Colin and found herself missing the solitude of their usual morning conversations. Then Leah and Adam broke into laughter once more, and Diana looked back to her sherry instead.

* * *

Though perhaps not as dramatic as the previous social engagement in which Diana had taken part, tonight's dinner party was not nearly as diverting as she had hoped. Throughout the soup and most of the main course, Diana had alternated between feelings of fatigue and distraction. She had caught Mister Arnold's eye at the other end of the table but could not speak to him without every other attendee—including Uncle James, most critically—listening in. Speaking with him would have to wait until later, she decided.

And even though she was seated by Leah and Colin, as she had been at her triumphant fracas at the previous dinner party, somehow tonight she was unable to engage with Colin in the same kind of verbal altercation. Oh, he had certainly tried to instigate another sparring match; hardly a minute went by without a cutting remark in her direction.

But each time Diana found herself beginning to banter back and forth with the man, she found her cheeks growing red hot, her voice dimming in embarrassment. Where before there had been the elegant swordplay of perfectly matched duellists, tonight Diana was laying down her blade and accepting each of his slashes without defending

herself.

The most puzzling thing about it was that she could not for the life of her figure out *why* it all felt so different this time. It might have something to do with Uncle James, she reasoned, or perhaps the damnable knowing smiles Leah had been showering over her all evening.

None of that matters now, woman, clear your foolish head, Diana thought, rubbing her eyes and trying to regain some semblance of focus. She was standing alone beside an ornate clock in the entryway of the Leeson house. She had already bid her goodbyes to Leah, and Colin and Mister Radcliffe were off smoking cigars with Uncle James in his study.

Shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other on her uncomfortable shoes, Diana eyed the nearby sofas but decided she had better not lest she risk falling asleep before she could catch Mister Arnold for a word on his way out the door. Her earlier surge of happy liveliness had faded in the wake of the *apéritifs* in the library, leaving Diana beastly tired. The yawn won its struggle for dominance, and she helplessly covered her mouth with a gloved hand.

Over the last few days she had undergone a change in her sleep: so far as she could tell, she was no longer awoken throughout the night by the same horrible dreams that had haunted her these long months. But she could not say this change was necessarily for the better, either; in the place of her usual nightmares, she had strange, dark dreams that she could not remember on waking.

She could not recall much of these dreams, though she had the sense they were on the same subject each night. They seemed important, somehow, and dark, coming from some part of her that was deeper than thought, deeper than memory.

When she did wake up in the morning, she found she had been perspiring, and the muscles in her legs and fingers ached terribly. More than anything, though, she found she was twice as sleepy in the morning as when she had gone to bed the night previous. Even recalling these details at this late hour prompted another cantankerous yawn to wrack Diana's frame.

"Dear Diana, I do hope you're not having to go without sleep in this awful place," said Missus Arnold with a gentle laugh. Diana started, her face easing into a smile as she saw the old Arnold couple approach her with their raincoats over their shoulders.

"Lord knows I wouldn't be able to rest here—all those strange corridors and hallways running every which way. To say nothing of the way that man's voice booms and echoes from the ceilings." Missus Arnold shuddered, and Mister Arnold patted her arm and shushed her with an embarrassed clearing of his throat.

"Victoria, please," he said, casting a glassy eye about. *Is he looking for someone who might report such rudeness to Uncle James?* Diana wondered, recalling her own weeks of anxiety.

"Jerome, please," Missus Arnold returned in a cross tone of voice. She took in a deep breath through her nose as if calming herself. "I'm sorry, I just don't know if I can hold it in any longer. After that dinner ... well, I'll leave you two to speak a moment. If I don't see myself out to the carriage, I may explode. Or worse: tell Sir James what I really think of him, as well as his moustache and his—"

"*Victoria.*" He shook his wizened head even as Diana laughed cheerily at his wife's vituperative comments. "I'm sorry, Diana. I wouldn't

want either of us to make anything harder for you here.”

“That’s all right, Mister Arnold. I’m only happy to see the two of you here.”

“I can’t say I’d ever been here until the previous dinner party.” Mister Arnold craned his head around, squinting his grey eyes at the ornaments and decorations that peered down from every corner. He clucked his tongue in an incomprehensible gesture. “I don’t know what I expected. But certainly I hadn’t thought it would be so grand as this.”

Diana nodded. “I would not call it a happy home by any means, but the dramatic architecture does seem fitting, somehow. If I do have to be a maiden kept prisoner in a tower, it may as well be a suitably Gothic place.” Mister Arnold gave a thin smile at her words as he continued looking around, distracted.

“No, I’d always heard that Sir James was in rather grim financial straits. That was why your mother and father had always been so happy to send him money from time to time.” He tutted again, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. “I suppose a house as large as this must be a burden in its own right. The costs of upkeep for such an ostentatious home must be—”

Her vision narrowed, the world around them melting away into a faint blur. “What ... what do you mean?” Diana’s heart was pounding so volubly that she could barely hear the words she had just spoken. “Mother and Father ... they would give Uncle James money? But why?”

Mister Arnold shook his head with a glum expression, his thin steel-

coloured hair shifting delicately on his pate. "I'm afraid I was never privy to the particulars. Even as your father's friend, I was given the figures to add up and little else. I can only trust that Sir James would not stoop to asking for assistance unless he genuinely needed it to prevent financial ruin. And William Hann, being a generous soul, did not hesitate to help his brother-in-law with any such difficulties, even if—"

"No, that's not right," Diana protested hoarsely. "I don't understand. With a house like this ... Uncle James has more money than he could ever spend, surely. What could ...?"

She rested a hand against a nearby bookshelf, feeling her legs quake beneath her. Her imagination, usually quick to invent a thousand possible scenarios, good or ill, now could only conjure dumb questions.

How could Uncle James live in such an extravagant fashion if he were lacking money?

Is there a reason he has been so eager to rob from my inheritance?

How much did he take of my parents' fortune even before they ...

Diana winced before recognising the touch of Jerome Arnold on her shoulder. She looked around hurriedly, afraid they might be watched, but saw they were alone in the cavernous entryway save for a distant footman by the open door. She swallowed, trying to put on a brave smile as she looked back to Mister Arnold, but his face was deathly serious and greyer than usual.

“As I say, I do not wish to make anything difficult for you,” he said softly through dry, cracked lips. “Your uncle has a ... complex reputation, Diana, but he is your family and your guardian. Barring any change in the law, he will remain such for the foreseeable future.”

Diana’s eyes dipped to the floor. She struggled to keep from loosing a flood of tears. “Yes, Mister Arnold. I understand.”

The older man pulled her in for a stiff, avuncular embrace, and Diana felt herself half-collapse into his arms, holding him tightly lest she fall to the floor.

“Even family may present a danger, Diana.”

She blinked, feeling her breath catch in her throat at the quiet words spoken into her ear.

The two stayed frozen there on the carpet, unmoving like dancers petrified in the middle of a reel. Mister Arnold cleared his throat. “I told you about the money only so you can keep up your guard. I do not trust Sir James, and neither should you. Keep your eyes open in this house, I pray you.”

Diana’s eyes fluttered open. Over Mister Arnold’s shoulder, she could just see a glimmer of something at the top of the stairs, just before they receded out of view into the shadow of the first floor. It disappeared as soon as her eye fell upon it, but she was quite certain that it whatever it was, it was a rich green in colour.

She clutched her fingers tightly against Mister Arnold's back. "I know. I have been listening at Uncle James' door whenever I can, though I have not yet heard anything of value."

"Keep listening, Diana. Keep aware, no matter what comes. I'm sorry I cannot take care of you," said the kindly old accountant, squeezing her insistently. "For your own sake and for your dear mother and father, *promise* me you will take care of yourself."

"I will, Mister Arnold. I promise."

Chapter 14

A Spark in the Darkness

“And here I thought I had seen every inch of the grounds by now,” said Diana happily as they settled onto a low stone bench.

“Surely by now, you should know that there’s no end of surprises in the Leeson house.” Colin withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat that had beaded on his forehead. “Why, just this morning, I found a second ballroom behind a door I had never noticed before.”

“I suppose it serves us both right for being so unobservant,” Diana returned without hesitation. “Last night, I nearly tripped over a scullery I discovered under my bed.”

Colin chuckled. “I do hope you didn’t trip over any of the staff in the process. They were probably hiding from Sir James under there.”

Their laughter mingled in the warm, moist air that hung over them, and Colin found himself sighing as he looked out in appreciation of the scenery. An old elm tree towered over them, painting blissfully cool shadows over the little corner of the garden. Ringing the small, cobbled clearing were hundreds of vibrant orange daylilies, their trumpet-shaped blossoms reaching up to the heavens as if ready to burst forth in loud, celebratory fanfare for the last gasp of the summer.

From her position next to him, Colin heard Diana draw in a deep breath through her nose, apparently savouring the daylilies' scent. Suddenly he was acutely aware of how close together they were sitting—the old stone bench provided a scenic view of the garden, to be sure, but it was only a few feet long. He found himself suddenly recalling faint details of a recurring dream he had had over the last few nights, and the memory caused an uncomfortable heat under his collar that he could not seem to push away. His mind became clouded with racing thoughts of the shape of Diana's body, tracing her womanly curves that rested languidly on the bench just a few inches away from him ...

"Have, ah ..." Colin coughed, hoping to distract himself from these intrusive thoughts. "Have you had the pleasure of Mister Dull's company of late? I can only imagine the thrilling insights on the weather he must be aching to share with someone."

Diana chuckled at the characterization of her undeterred suitor, whose secret nickname she had shared with Colin a few days earlier. After half a breath, though, the laugh was transformed into a groan of frustration. "I tell you, the man is so deathly dull it's a wonder he does not bore *himself* to sleep. As horrid as it is for me to listen to every half-formed thought that passes through his head, imagine how much worse it is for he himself. At least I only see him once every few days."

"Once every few days is still far more than anyone should have to suffer through."

"I keep hoping that he will realise that I have neither answered him in conversation nor looked him in the eyes in weeks." Diana sighed once more, and Colin could hear a lifetime of frustration released with her breath. "Someday, he will make a fine husband to a perfectly lovely deaf woman. It's a shame for his sake that he is so slow in understanding that I will not marry him."

"I admire your persistence. Courage, Diana! I'm sure it won't be much longer—it took twenty earthquakes to topple the Lighthouse at Alexandria, and that was made of stone. Surely Gerard Dunn won't take much more punishment than that," Colin said, though he felt a peculiar edge of viciousness creep into the corner of his mood. He looked off into the distance, trying to bury this emotion in a casual tone of voice. "Still, if Sir James decides to end this game before you've thoroughly alienated good Mister Dull ... I suppose there are worse men you could be forced into marrying."

Diana gave him a vicious glare, and Colin immediately regretted letting this question slip. *You know better than to provoke her on matters of actual importance, fool*, he thought, wincing. Indeed, over the past several weeks, the two of them had developed a spontaneous, unspoken yet ironclad code of contact for interacting with one another. Certain important topics would only be alluded to, whether in public or private, and others would not be brought up at all. Chief among these were the subjects of his birth father, the ghastly fate that met her parents, and Sir James' plans for her marriage.

Diana fell into a sullen silence, and Colin ground his teeth in consternation. He shifted his position uncomfortably on the stone bench, and his mind raced to find something innocuous or even complimentary to fill the quiet. "I don't know how women stand being ordered about so. I'm sure I could never put up with it," he said with a sigh.

"Really?" He looked over to see Diana looking at him with a carnivorous smile—too late, he realised the opening he had given her. "In that case, you might want to tell your stepfather that there has been some mistake and that you don't wish to be ordered about after all. Once you've finished shining his boots, that is."

Colin laughed good-naturedly. "I suppose I deserve that. I mean what I say, though. Were I in your position, I don't think I would be able to

go on fighting my guardian.”

“What you mean is that you would give in to Sir James’ orders right away, thus avoiding the fight altogether.” She adopted a soldier’s posture and gave a hearty salute to an imaginary officer. “Yes, Sir James, at once, sir! Marry Mister Dunn, immediately!”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I *am* being told that I need to marry,” said Colin, a harsh edge creeping into his voice. “My stepfather has been increasingly insistent on the subject, in fact.”

“Yes, it must be terrible for you. Being kept from your family’s fortune and possessions, having the force of the law compelling you to do as you are told, having your maidenhead sold to anyone who will provide a decent price, being given over to be used and forced to breed with ...” Diana stopped to adopt a look of mock surprise. “Oh, I’m so terribly sorry, I must have confused our situations! You only have to have your future discussed with you over a glass of wine, being told you had better think about changing your bachelor ways someday when it’s jolly convenient for you. You see, our situations really are so very similar.”

Colin was more than accustomed to mockery by this point in his life. Every gentleman of the London ton was obliged to grow skin that was thick as cast iron, particularly one with as sharp a tongue as Colin Mullens. And certainly, he had earned more than his fair portion of scorn from Diana herself over this last summer. But where he was accustomed to laughing as hard as anyone at jokes at his expense or to returning such an assault with a swift counter-attack of his own ... this felt different.

Indeed, the temperature in the lovely summer garden seemed to turn several degrees colder in the moments that followed Diana’s comments. Usually, baleful words would easily slip out Colin’s far ear

and be forgotten just as quickly, but Diana's mocking words echoed inside his mind over and over. Against the lovely pastoral scene before them, Colin felt himself grow hard, cold, dour.

He could not bring himself to look in Diana's direction. Filled with a sudden urge to flee as far as he could, Colin stood without a word and made to leave the garden—even as he took this first step, he sensed he might never return, at least in Diana's company.

But it was not so. Before he could take a second step, he was stopped in place by the feeling of a small, soft hand resting insistently on his forearm. Colin wheeled about, irate, but felt his anger dissipate like a half-forgotten dream when he saw the look of genuine remorse in Diana's eyes.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, Colin," she said softly. Her eyes dipped low, and for an instant, he feared she would burst into tears. But with what he now knew to be characteristic strength, Diana sniffed the tears away and met his gaze directly. "I know it isn't your fault. None of this is, and it isn't right for me to lash out at you just because I'm angry with—"

Diana broke off, losing ground to the incipient deluge. After a moment, she looked up at him again, and tears flowed freely down her reddened cheeks. "I hope you can forgive me."

Colin felt a rush of instinct within himself, every fibre of his primordial animal brain urging him to hold and comfort this vulnerable figure. Some small, craven part of him won out over this impulse, however, and instead he wordlessly sat down by Diana again. She took this gesture as he had intended and rested her head against his shoulder with a tiny sigh of relief. Without understanding how it happened, Colin noticed that his arm had found its way around Diana's shoulder, and as soon as he saw this, he pulled her closer to him in a tight one-armed embrace. She repeated the quiet, pleasurable

sound she had just uttered and rubbed her golden locks gently against his shoulder.

The two sat there for what seemed like a very long time. The retinue of small white clouds made their procession across the sky, the brilliant orange blooms twirled and danced their voluptuous steps in the wind, the glorious yellow sun continued its ceaseless march across the sky and shifted the black constellations of the elm's leaves across the cobblestones. Time passed in the garden, as ever it did in the crueller world beyond its flowers and stones.

Though not a word was spoken, Colin felt regret pour from Diana's body, and as he continued to squeeze her feminine frame against himself with one arm, he tried to crush out any feelings of sadness that might be left in the woman. Once again, he felt memories of his fervent nightly imaginings well up inside him, made all the more intense by the feeling of her body against his. This time Colin did not shy away from this desire but let it linger in his awareness, turned it over in his consciousness—he did not stifle this spark in the darkness but instead reverently watched the art of its burning.

His fingers moved for greater purchase on Diana's narrow, feminine shoulder, and he relished the subtle loosening of her muscles, the quiet change in her breathing, that accompanied this touch. It struck him that nothing in his life had ever felt as important as this glorious, quiet moment. The soft stirring of Diana against their seat drove Colin's imagination into a frenzy, and he could not deny the hardness he felt bloom in his breeches.

Now more insistently, he brought his hand lower beneath her sheer gown, past her collarbone, and towards the supple mounds of femininity that had so occupied his attention for these long days and eternal nights. He relished the almost imperceptible lust that played just beneath the surface of her gorgeous blue eyes. Diana bit her lip softly, and Colin felt himself nearly lose his mind entirely to the desire that would not be stifled within him.

“You know, my friend Leah Reid was suggesting the most untoward things at the party yesterday evening,” said Diana in a playful tone of voice, as their desirous touching slowed into a slow languor. Her eyes were still fixed on one of the dozens of butterflies paying their graceful homage to the lilies.

“It sounds as though she and Adam Radcliffe have more in common than either of them would like to admit, then,” Colin said with a smirk.

“Wouldn’t that be something to see? Mister and Missus Adam Radcliffe—I don’t know which of them I should feel sorry for!” Diana laughed. Then her demeanour grew distant once again. “Leah was pointing out that you have been showing me to quite a lot of secluded, out-of-the-way parts of the Leeson house over the last several weeks.”

Colin felt his muscles turn to iron at the words, the hairs on the back of his neck standing at attention. Quick as a shot, he was filled with a thousand competing desires: to deny the implication, to laugh at Diana for suggesting something so ridiculous, to rise and speak no more as he left their isolated little paradise forever.

More than anything, he was filled with the perverse thought that he might agree with what she had said, that he might hold her closer still and press his mouth against her soft, full lips ...but he put this aside with great zeal. *Man is not ruled by his base impulses*, he thought, swallowing. *That’s what Sir James has always told me. Do not make a fool of yourself, Colin. Keep yourself under control.*

If Diana detected the conflict within him, she gave no sign of it. Instead, she merely laughed lightly and shook her head, her red-

blonde curls shaking merrily with the gesture. "I was all ready to argue the point when you and Mister Radcliffe came in. And seeing where you've shown me this morning, I cannot say I feel quite as sure in my position."

Colin licked his lips, forcing a derisive laugh from them. "It's almost as though I have been trying to get you somewhere out of sight of the rest of the household." *What are you even saying, you dunce?*

Diana shifted slightly in her position, and Colin felt the unmistakable weight and softness of one of her breasts against his chest. His posture grew still more rigid; it had already been taking all his self-control to keep that spark in himself from igniting, something that now seemed almost inevitable.

"It would be most scandalous if our circumstances were not what they are. Have you ever thought of that?" Diana looked up to him, and her pale blue eyes were dancing with a million golden motes of desire. In all his travels and all his years, Colin was sure he had never seen anything so beautiful.

Breath came into his chest in short, ragged gulps. Somewhere between the buzzing in his head and the smoke that had begun to issue forth from that solitary little spark, he stammered, "Have I thought about what it might be if you and I ... if we were not ... if we ...?"

"Yes," Diana breathed. Her eyes closed.

And then his lips came crashing into hers.

Idiot! he barked at himself. *What are you doing, you utter fool? Allowing your passions to carry away what little sense you have ... disgusting, and an abuse of Diana's trust to let yourself be so swept away.* This voice was not unfamiliar to Colin; he had heard it in his mind for all his life, and it always sounded like James Leeson. *You're a gentleman, not an animal. Remove yourself from that young lady before you do something you will both regret!*

Yet even as these recriminations leapt into Colin's mind, he found himself rendered insensate—or perhaps the opposite, he thought in wonder, as though possessed by all the emotions the human soul can experience at the same time—as he found Diana not leaping away from him in horror but returning his kiss with fiery passion.

He could feel her fingers clench by her side, feel the thunder of his own heartbeat resonate in the soft, pillowy pinkness of her lips. As their warm skin maintained this contact for longer, and her mouth pressed harder against his, her breath coming hot and hard against his face, all his confusion, all his feelings of wrongness evaporated like nightmares before the morning sun.

It was a sensation completely unlike anything Colin had experienced before; though he was not entirely unschooled in the ways of love, the touch of a woman had never kindled more than a lustful spark in his breast. Now it was no mere spark he felt, but a roaring blaze that warmed him inside and out, burning away every care and memory that usually occupied his mind.

He closed his eyes, letting himself be carried away by the wordless bliss of the world of two they had forged with their touch.

Chapter 15

A Thousand Singular Moments

Though it lasted but a few moments, what transpired in the garden that morning was a wholly unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience. She ran over the memory a thousand times in her mind, her inner parts becoming hot and slick with the thought, but Diana honestly had a difficult time recalling anything that happened afterward.

It was clear she and Colin must have left that garden at some point, obviously, and she likely went through the motions of the day—reading the novel she had taken from the little Leeson library, sharing a meal with Priscilla and Sir James, possibly even passing another dull afternoon in the company of Gerard Dunn. But any detail of these events was utterly absent from her mind.

It was as though the immensity of their kiss was such that it cast a long shadow over her memory, blotting out less massive events. Or, on further thought, she considered that it might be the inverse of that case, that the memory of the kiss was so blazingly bright that she could see nothing but its radiance in her mind's eye.

Then again, she thought with a grim smile as she lay awake and overwarm atop her bedclothes late that night, *it could be I simply enjoy thinking on the kiss itself too much to be able to cast my memory elsewhere*. She lifted her fingers to her lips, feeling where Colin's mouth had pressed against her and felt a quake of anticipation deep within her womanhood.

"He kissed me," Diana said aloud in her silent bedroom, the words swallowed by the pillows and plush curtains. It felt good to say the

words, lending substance to what now felt that it must surely be nothing more than a fantastical invention of her imagination, so she said it again in as many permutations as she could think of.

“Colin kissed me. I kissed Colin. Colin and I kissed. We kissed.”

She took a long, slow breath, unsure if she was excited or frightened by how her body shook when the air left her frame. The implications of what had happened in the garden were enormous, she was sure. The world was a very different place this midnight than it was the midnight previous.

But as certain as Diana was of this conclusion, so she also knew that just *how* things were different was utterly unknown to her. It was as though she were staring at a palimpsest in an old, illuminated manuscript from the Middle Ages, she thought: just beneath the surface she could see something was written on the page, but it was made illegible, even unimportant by an immense brightly-coloured illustration of a knight slaying a fire-breathing dragon.

What a thoroughly unhelpful analogy, Diana said to herself, frowning. She turned onto her side and closed her eyes, even though she was certain sleep would not be swift in coming to her. Indeed, instead of sleep, she was visited by a hundred answerless questions.

Will he try to kiss me again?

Do I want him to do that?

Do I want him to do even more?

What does this mean for Uncle James' plans for marrying me off?

Around and around, these questions swirled in her mind. All the while, it was underscored by the ceaseless rhythm of her pounding heartbeat beating its own reply, one that gave Diana no solace though it answered every one of these questions at once. She found herself so terrified of what she heard sounding steadily in her chest that she clutched her pillow tighter, beckoned to sleep more anxiously ... anything but give voice to what her foolish, unthinking heart was telling her.

It was a singular moment because it was my first kiss, she thought angrily, hoping she could reason herself into sleep. No other kiss will be the same because no other will be the first—that is all that has made this special. There will be no other singular, never-to-come-again kisses like that. From Colin or from any other man ...

Sleep did eventually come, blessedly, and with it dreams more sublimely wonderful than words could ever describe.

* * *

Summer slipped inevitably into autumn. Diana's life continued much the same as it had, with all the same routines going on as ever through the changing of the seasons. It occurred to her once or twice that she had been forgetting to carry out her plan of surveillance on her guardian in his study; each time she resolved to adhere more strictly to this plan, and each time she forgot it as soon as she clapped eyes on Colin Mullens at the breakfast table. And every night, she was beset by the same maddening question:

How can a singular moment happen again and again?

For that was exactly what went on. Most of her life was unchanged, the routine she had constructed for herself nearly identical in most respects ... but as she had sensed that first happy, lonely night after that one singular kiss, everything was changed. Each morning she would go downstairs in the pale blue light of early morning, stepping on quiet feet through the sleeping house, to find Colin waiting for her at the breakfast table.

They would walk together on the grounds if the weather were fair, then Colin would go off to speak with his stepfather, while Diana passed her time writing letters to Leah, visiting Priscilla Leeson or Missus Fessler, reading novels, trying not to fall asleep in the company of Gerard Dunn. Eventually, she would share a meal with the Leesons and Colin and try not to provoke Uncle James too acutely, then retire to her bedroom to begin another difficult hunt for sleep. In short, it was all just as it had been.

But at the same time, now there was a world of difference made by that one little kiss. Now her breakfasts with Colin were charged with anticipation; their conversation was stilted, quiet, full of odd starts and embarrassed blushes from both of them. Now Diana found herself re-reading the same page in her novel over and over, unable to focus her mind sufficiently to remember the words. Now her dinners were awkward affairs in which she and Colin would meet one another's gaze or blush furiously after an errant word in the conversation reminded them of what had happened on that morning's walk, of how desperately she had craved that they could be free to strip themselves and succumb to their base urges there on the table.

And their walks ... *Oh!*

In truth, Diana was unsure whether Colin really did know a thousand small, secluded corners of the Leeson grounds. It seemed impossible considering the size of the estate. Really, he could have been bringing her to the same scenic bench every morning, and she would not have noticed; her mind had no room for flowers or landscapes. Their walks were even more pregnant with expectation than their breakfasts.

There were times she felt nearly possessed by whatever demon had taken up residence inside her—a dozen times or more, she had to restrain the urge to push Colin against the hedges and tear off both of their clothes in a mad fit of passion. To hold fast against these indecent thoughts, she tightened her fingers into fists, which gave her some measure of control over her lust ... but then Colin would subtly take her hand in his when they were safely out of sight of the groundskeepers or curious eyes from the windows, and all her self-control would collapse once again.

After what felt like an eternity of anticipation, when she and Colin did finally arrive at whatever private copse or twist in the garden path they had settled on, their conversation was of a markedly different character than their previous battles of words. Diana had always had little truck with flirtatious or explicit conversation with men; that had been Leah's forte in their mutual appearances in London society.

But now, she gave voice to a thousand secret things she had sworn during her solitary night-time fumbings never to share with another soul. Colin would listen attentively, smile that smile of his, crack a good-natured joke or two, and sheepishly confess some of his own secretive thoughts and doings. They spoke in soft, hushed voices, their eyes always rushing to follow any suspicious sounds as their words died in their throats.

Then, after a few aching moments of waiting to make sure they were alone, words were abandoned altogether in favour of a different, more animal sort of communication. Every one of Diana's senses felt alive

with electricity, making the rest of her existence feel like a feeble imitation of this true human experience.

There were long moments when the two would gaze into one another's eyes without a word passing between them, and it was these moments when she felt she came closest to understanding the true Colin Mullens. She could never seem to get enough of the way Colin smelled, either—it was by no means an offensive scent, especially as he was apparently most assiduous about bathing regularly, but there was something undeniably bestial about it, and she felt herself grow wild, untameable as she drank it in greedily.

But the true appeal of their garden retreats was in the touching. Though Diana was not a prudish woman by nature, her occasional giggling rule-breaking with boys had been limited to clandestine hand-holding at dinner parties. As a result, she found herself completely overwhelmed by the stupefying variety of kissing that the human body seemed to be capable of, and she thrilled to the lessons that Colin gave her in this art.

The feeling of his lips brushing against her neck was an epiphany that nearly sent her into an ecstatic paroxysm right there amid the marigolds. His hands, too, proved most capable at uncovering loci of pleasure on Diana's body that she had never noticed before. For a time, Colin had to cease using his fingers to trace the invisible line from her ear to her collarbone, as the moans that escaped her lips could not be silenced with any amount of effort.

All this secrecy served not to stifle their lust but to enflame it further, an effect only increased by the occasional appearance of Christopher, the gardener, and once of Colin's mother, Priscilla. Diana felt herself redden with shame when the latter nearly caught them mid-kiss and vowed to give up this exciting new endeavour at once lest both Colin's and her own reputations be ruined needlessly. This vow was stridently adhered to for a full three minutes, at which point it was abandoned with great relief as Colin swept her up in another earth-shaking

embrace.

And somehow, defying all reason, every kiss, every touch, every caress was bursting with the same singular, once-in-a-lifetime quality. Every time Colin lifted his strong, masculine chin and his smile coloured ever so slightly from its usual cocky charm, Diana felt herself melt into a puddle of desire, knowing she would do anything he asked of her and damn the consequences. Every time she felt his arms around her, she wanted to cry out in sorrow that this moment would have to end.

And every night, she lay awake, even more stunned than before, unable to get the fresh memory of his touch out of her head. Each kiss was repeated a thousand times, through hours of tossing and turning and the furtive moans that echoed from her ceiling during her late-night, increasingly desperate searching in the darkness.

I wonder if this is what going mad feels like, Diana thought as she collapsed atop her bed, her arms limp at her sides. A smile came to her as her heart provided its same insistent answer. *If it is, I cannot imagine wanting ever to be sane.*

Chapter 16

Proper Dinner Conversation

Amid all the tumult that haunted Diana's thoughts day and night, she was stricken with an answer to a persistent nocturnal question. It was on a stormy night that followed a particularly compelling exploration with Colin in the thick of his father's rose garden, a night when she was awoken from a deep sleep by a crack of lightning that seemed to land right on top of her head.

As she sat bolt upright in the bed, fighting to calm her frantic breathing, Diana realised that she had been roused from the dream that had recurred frequently over the last few weeks ... and for the first time, she had a clear picture in her mind of the dream itself.

Shaking, she poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher on her bedside table to calm her nerves, and as she drank, she ran over the details of the dream. She had been in the middle of a vast sylvan glade, a veritable army of sunflowers circling her even as the warm sun shone down on her with its cheery golden light. She had turned at a sound behind her to see Colin approach her with arms spread wide, his thin white shirt billowing in the breeze and revealing his broad chest and strong, masculine arms.

She felt herself run to him, and there was a whirlwind of activity as he took her in his arms, and they collapsed onto a cloudlike white bed there amid the grass. Their clothes vanished save for a winking golden ring on Colin's finger that she had not seen before, and with her garments also disappeared Diana's every reservation, doubt, inhibition, and she gave herself to him completely and gleefully in full sight of all the green and verdant world.

But to whom was he wedded in his dream? Diana asked herself, swallowing. The answer seemed obvious enough that she felt ridiculous even wondering such a thing. *Is that what it truly feels like for a wife to lay with her husband? To feel so complete, so uninhibited, and natural and true ...*

This fantasy had burned in her memory from the moment she rose from her bed in the morning. As soon as she opened her door to join Colin for breakfast, she discovered a note with his apologies, explaining that he would be indisposed for the morning and unable to join her for their ‘morning exercise’, as they had begun to cheekily refer to their excursions. Diana’s disappointment was considerable at this, and she promptly climbed back into her bed to lose herself in her eager recollection of some of the more specific aspects of her dream.

By late morning, Diana began to wonder if she was doing something wrong, either to Colin or herself, by losing herself so fully in the fantasy they had constructed together. By the afternoon, she was quite sure the intelligent thing to do would be to tell Colin she could no longer enjoy such exercises with him, and by evenfall, she was sure only that she had no idea what she should do with herself.

Think of what Mister Arnold told you, cried the ever-smaller voice of good sense from the recesses of her mind. *Think of your own future! Forget about this silly infatuation! Keep your eyes open and your mind alert so you can seize an opportunity when it presents itself.*

It is an unfortunate truth that such wisdom carries little weight against the titanic force of silly infatuation. However, between the pouring rain and Colin’s absence from her field of vision, Diana found herself growing ever more grim as the day wore on, and by the time she left her room to join the Leesons for dinner, she had finally scrounged up the resolve needed to ignore Colin and look to her own situation.

No more listening to lust, she thought, steeling herself in preparation to make conversation with Colin and his parents. *Your destiny is yours to do with as you wish—all you have to do is keep your head and take an opportunity as soon as you see one.*

“Good evening, Miss Hann,” she heard Colin say. Looking up, she could feel her expression of dour determination melt into surprise when, for the first time since arriving at the Leeson house, she saw only Colin beside his seat at the table. His stepfather and mother were absent, and the table was set only for two.

Colin was standing ready to pull Diana’s chair out for her, his hair thick and tousled against his dark blue jacket and the faintest wisp of dark chest hair snaking out through the loose collar of his linen shirt. Always given to smiling, tonight Colin positively beamed, his grin bespeaking simultaneous confidence, eagerness, and bashfulness that made Diana’s blood run hot.

Diana’s good sense may have had something to say about the sight. Unfortunately, whatever was said was drowned out by an infinitely louder observation from an altogether more persuasive corner of Diana’s mind:

My God, how is it he manages to look so effortlessly handsome?

She mutely accepted Colin’s offer of help, feeling his hands against the chair as he slid it under her bottom at her place at the table. “Is ...” She stopped, feeling herself stumble for words. *Get a hold of yourself, stupid girl!* “Are your mother and stepfather not joining us this evening, then?”

Colin smiled as he took his own seat. "Sir James and my mother extend their regrets, but they will be attending a dinner in Hammersmith. They are not expecting to be back until sometime around midnight. We're all alone here, you and I." He subtly licked his lips so quickly, Diana was not sure she had not imagined it; whether it was real or not, it set her insides aquiver.

Gritting her teeth to stop herself from trembling, Diana looked down at the table and proceeded to joylessly cut into the roast chicken on her plate.

"You know, I'm having the strangest sensation of *déjà vu*." Colin laughed warmly. "I could swear we've had this exact conversation before ... at this very table, even."

"I imagine you've had very similar conversations with many a lady," Diana grumbled, still trying to sort out how she felt about this unprecedented degree of privacy.

"I must say, I'm surprised and more than a little hurt." Diana did not dare take this bait and look up at Colin, but from the sound of his voice, she sensed he was still having her on. After a moment without a reply, he continued, "Then again, I suppose if you are so uninterested in the meal or proper dinner conversation, we could proceed straight to the basket making."

Diana's hand flew to her mouth in what she was sure was an idiotic-looking show of modesty. *Is he ... he isn't ... doesn't that mean ...?* The argot was distantly familiar to her from giggling conversations with Leah and other girlfriends, its meaning made abundantly clear by Colin's arched eyebrow and crooked smile.

She was filled at once with anger at the implication, scepticism as to whether he was only joking, the desperate yet taboo hope that he was not—then, above all other emotions, dread at being discovered. Her eyes darted to the door to the kitchens, her mind racing with the thought of what Uncle James would say if he knew she and Colin had been ...

As if reading her thoughts, Colin laughed gently and explained, “I’ve asked Mister Davenport to have the staff give us a wide berth this evening. Unless we ring the bell, no one will be coming into the dining room until it is time for breakfast.”

“Won’t that arouse suspicion?”

Colin’s eyebrow arched at her penultimate word, and again Diana felt herself blush hideously. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. After all, I certainly do not intend to do anything untoward. Do you?”

She struggled to keep a straight face, still unsure if she was being put on.

“In any case, you needn’t worry. Mister Davenport told me he would give much of the staff the evening off. Such moments of rest are in short supply in this house if you have not noticed. I think he and the staff were relieved enough to be out of my stepfather’s eyesight that they would agree to virtually anything.”

Diana folded her arms, her mouth reduced to a short, forbidding line. *Weeks of sneaking around the gardens, and he has never once acknowledged what we have done inside this house. He’s up to something, I*

wager. Well, whatever game he's devised to entertain himself, I won't fall for it.

"I promise you, on my honour—no, on yours, which you'll likely agree I value much more on my own ..." Colin rested a hand against his heart, a semi-serious frown on his face. "We will not be bothered nor spied upon this evening. We are free to behave as we like, as free as we are on any of our delightful morning exercises."

Diana stared into his eyes for a long while, trying to drag any insincerity from his expression. Finding none, to her surprise, she lifted a napkin to her mouth, taking a moment to marshal her thoughts ... then lowered it and said with a sinister smirk, "I'm flattered, but I'm not sure I'm flexible enough to do all *that* with this table in the way."

Their laughter rang long and loud from the chandeliers, and just like that, Diana was shot full of nothing but feelings of affection for the handsome young man. For hours they ate, drank, talked, and laughed; their conversation turned ever bolder and saucier by Diana's comment and by the copious glassfuls of wine. Somewhere between the third and fourth glass of wine, her affection began to transmute into desire, her dreams still fresh at the forefront of her mind, and when Colin placed his hand on the table between them, she did not hesitate to lay her own hand atop his. Their fingers interlaced, her eyes found his own impossibly green ones, and their conversation came to a halt as their blood rushed to their cheeks.

"You know," said Colin in a low, husky voice that neared a whisper. Diana looked at him anew, feeling that she would happily assent to whatever he was about to say. "I cannot say I feel like eating or drinking any more. Yet it seems a shame to end such a lovely evening already."

She swallowed, nodded mutely. Distantly she was surprised at her uncharacteristic quiet, but how could she think anything at all over the mad, insistent cry of desire from every cell in her body? Or when faced with those gorgeous green eyes?

“Perhaps we should continue this somewhere else.” A mote of intensity flickered in a sea of green. “Somewhere we can be alone.”

“My room?” Diana squeaked.

Colin’s eyes darted to the door, and though his bearing was as unshakeably self-assured as ever, his face endearingly flushed a gentle shade of red. He nodded, looking as though he were trying not to smile. “Not now,” he mouthed. “After the staff has gone to bed.”

Diana nodded her assent; her mind blanked out as though filled with thick fog. She was dimly aware that she and Colin parted, that they left their dishes on the table for the servants, and she walked down the corridor in a haze. All the while, her brain was devoid of thought, of emotion, of anything but the same two words repeated like a chant:

My room. My room. My room.

And then she was sitting there on her bed, and time resumed at a glacial pace. Her mind was still fixated on the same two unhelpful words, unable to supply her any guidance for how to proceed. To distract herself from the hammering of her heart in her ears, Diana occupied herself with all the tasks that had some marginal need of being completed—arranging the pillows on her bed, shifting the position of the cushions on her settee, desperately looking for something she could tidy or straighten, though Missus Fessler had already completed her usual competent work on the room.

She looked around for any manner of refreshment to offer Colin or to steady her own nerves, but finding none save a pitcher of water, she soon gave up this particular search. Finally, she settled on making sure the drapes were fully closed before positioning herself in what she hoped was a casual pose on one side of the small sofa, facing the door and opening her novel on her lap.

She glanced at the clock and saw that only ten minutes had transpired since she had left the dining room.

What time does the staff retire for the night? Diana wondered bitterly, unsure if she was overeager or dreading Colin's arrival. She studied the page of her book that she had marked, then spent several minutes flipping back through the pages, having no memory of having read almost anything in the story.

It became absolutely tortuous, the waiting that ensued. Diana second-guessed her impulsive acquiescence to Colin's proposal to visit her in her room, promising to send him away as soon as she heard him at the door or to hide under the covers and pretend she had not heard him knock.

Second-guessing this reversal of her opinion, she decided there was no harm in having him in for a short while, reasoning it was nothing more than a continuation of their harmless explorations in the garden. Back and forth, her mind ran until she was dizzy from the effort. All the while, she felt her body stiffen with anticipation at each noise that entered her ear, real or imagined.

When at last there was a soft knock on the door, Diana felt her hair stand on end, her heart leaping into her throat. She frantically tried to

focus her eyes on her book, to pretend she had forgotten about Colin entirely by this point, but this artifice was abandoned by the time he slid onto the carpet and closed the door softly behind him.

“Good evening,” he said, stalking over to her and sitting on the settee so close she feared she might scream.

She swallowed this impulse and managed to squeeze out a shaky, “Good evening.” But she could see in his eyes that he had not come for more conversation, a feeling she knew with every fibre of her being that she shared. So instead, she dropped her book carelessly to the ground, losing her place completely, even as Colin leaned forward and their lips met in another impossibly singular kiss.

Again and again, their mouths clashed together. A bolt of lightning snaked through Diana’s body at the feeling of Colin’s knee pressed on the settee right between her half-opened legs, her womanhood quivering at the thousand possible somethings of this contact.

She drew in a deep, trembling breath as Colin’s left hand ran down her cheek tenderly, then nearly choked with pleasurable shock as his right brushed against her full, heaving bosom through her dress. Everything she thought to say, every trace of mind or reason was blotted out, leaving her with no words left in her brain but increasingly insistent whispered choruses of ‘yes.’

Diana did not know who first rose to their feet and conveyed the pair to the bed—by now, their limbs seemed to move in concert with one another, their heartbeats keeping the same allegro time and their breath coming as one. Whoever instigated it, all the pleasures of the flesh in which Colin had tutored her of late had not prepared Diana for the feeling of lying back against the bed and seeing him crawl in with her. She felt an aching, bottomless emptiness cry out inside her, and she whimpered as she felt Colin lie beside her, wishing she could

feel the pressure of his body atop her instead, feel him within her as a husband completes his wife.

But Colin was still Colin, it seemed, and relished teasing her as a cat does a mouse. Even as she felt her body ready itself to be devoured by the large, strong body pressed against her, instead, he only pulled her close with one powerful arm and ran his teeth delicately along the nape of her neck. Diana cried out, half with laughter, and felt herself stifled by a hand against her mouth.

“If you make such noise, I shall have to stop,” Colin said in a soft voice, almost inaudible over the throbbing of her pulse. “You don’t want that, do you?”

Diana shook her head furiously, feeling her brow furrow in despair at the thought.

Colin gave a tiny smirk, and she felt herself melt even more at the sight. “Are you sure? I’m not sure I believe that—”

“Oh, shut up and kiss me,” she interrupted as she wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. She could hear Colin laugh in surprise, but this did not stop him from returning her kiss with great enthusiasm, their tongues tangling into a frenetic dance.

The quiet symphony of ecstatic pleasure played on and on in Diana’s little room. Their passionate embraces built to teasing crescendos and long, silent passages in which she simply stared into his infinite green eyes. They kissed in ways that pulled at strange forbidden corners of her body, and she thrilled at each discovery of half-hidden points of difference between male and female, intrigued by the perpetual promise of *what might be*.

What might be if they fully lost control of their senses? What might be if they removed just one article of his clothing or hers? What might be if she kissed him the way he had been kissing her? What might be if they really were as alone in the house, in the very world, as she found herself wishing they were more and more often?

Eventually, the reverent stillness of the room grew into silence as dark and complete as a field covered in a thick blanket of January snow. Diana lay on her side facing the closed curtains, the back half of her body deliciously enveloped in Colin's grasp. They lay there in beautiful equilibrium; there was no need for words, even for actions, so complete was their shared existence. From time to time, he gave her a tiny kiss on the top of her ear or sighed as he rubbed his nose against her tousled strawberry blonde curls.

"I've been dreaming of this, you know," she said softly into the empty wall in front of her face. Colin did not answer save with his warm breath that pleasantly tickled her ear.

"I've dreamed of being held like this ... and more besides. I've dreamed of you and I in a field together, married, of giving myself to you as a wife does her husband. They are happy dreams. I think they may be the happiest moments in my life. I wish I ... I wish that ..."

Diana stopped, unable to bring herself to say anything more. She waited for an answer from Colin, but all she heard was his steady, untroubled breathing. Looking over one shoulder, she could see that he had fallen fast asleep holding her. There was no trace of artifice on his face; all she saw was his glorious, handsome, real self.

She sighed and turned back to the wall, subtly shifting her position

against his body.

* * *

Now.

Diana's eyes fluttered open. The room was dark, and she could feel a strong arm draped across her waist. There was a soft snoring sound in her ear.

Now, damn you! Now is your chance!

She blinked, trying to shake off the haze of sleep and desire that still lay like a thick fog blanketing her senses. Her mind struggled to understand the half-formed idea deep in her consciousness. *Chance for what?* she asked herself. *Uncle James and Priscilla are away for the evening ... Colin is asleep here ...* Diana rubbed her eyes, trying to force the pieces to come together.

You've been waiting for an opportunity, foolish girl. Don't let it slip you by!

Diana's eyes blinked closed again, and she stifled a heavy sigh. Now she understood the opportunity she was given—one that had not come in months and was unlikely to appear again. But the bed was so deliciously warm, and the feeling of Colin's strong frame against hers was pleasurable enough to make her heart ache. He seemed so content, so peaceful lying there behind her, and as he unconsciously shifted his position, subtly she detected a hardness that echoed something she had known only in dreams. *Perhaps I can stay for just a little while longer ...*

But her good sense would not grant her this reprieve. Even as she closed her eyes and tried to return to sleep, Diana was bombarded with thoughts of her mother and father lying on the cold London cobblestones, of Uncle James roaring with anger, of an eternity spent as the property of Gerard Dunn. And when even this proved to be insufficient persuasion, she heard Jerome Arnold's voice ring in her ears, saw his kindly face lined with concern.

Keep listening, Diana. Keep aware, no matter what comes. Promise me.

She grunted with frustration, resenting herself for being as sensible a woman as she was apparently cursed to be, and rose from her bed to take action. Colin murmured something incoherent as she carefully released herself from his grasp but fell back asleep before she could draw another breath.

The clock in the corridor chimed eleven times as Diana stole into the servants' staircase and climbed the steps on stocking-clad feet. She opened the door to the second storey corridor and peered out at the door to Uncle James' study. The corridor was empty and only dimly lit, and Diana cursed herself for not remembering to bring a candle. She began to second- and third-guess herself, unsure if the study would be locked or occupied, her guardian having returned home earlier than Colin had promised.

A door closed somewhere in the stairs beneath her feet. Diana froze, her blood running cold with fear. *Footsteps!*

Before she could draw another breath, in one fluid motion, she launched herself into the corridor, turned the doorknob, and plunged into the darkness of the study. Her eyes detected little in the darkness

of the room, so she closed the door behind herself and rested her back against it, trying to quiet her breathing and the thunder of her heartbeat.

Stupid girl, Diana cursed herself, her skin singing with electric fear. *That could have gone wrong in a hundred different ways. What if the door had been locked and you had broken your shoulder running into it? What if someone had seen you run in here? What if Uncle James is coming upstairs right this moment?*

She pulled herself straight at this last thought. *Don't let this opportunity pass you by.*

The room was largely as she remembered it, if somewhat less tidy than she had hoped. Amid the extravagant carpets on the floor and the fine wines kept in a breakfront, she saw massive piles of papers, folios bulging with still more papers, drawers stuffed with wrinkled and creased papers of a hundred sorts. Diana grumbled as she struggled to read any of the papers in the room's dim light, a task made minimally easier by pulling open the curtain and illuminating the desk in the unearthly blue light of the moon.

Even this assistance produced nothing but confusion in Diana. She flipped through dozens of mysterious accounts and dossiers, all filled with Uncle James' cramped handwriting denoting ... what? Goods bought and sold? Debts owed and repaid? Names, numbers, dates swirled into an inscrutable mess in Diana's head until she felt like screaming in frustration.

If there is truly anything here related to my inheritance in any way, it will take ten—no, a hundred hours to find it in all of this mess! Her eye fell upon the little safe under her guardian's desk, and she began to consider whether it might be possible to find the corresponding key.

Ding-ding-ding ... Ding-ding-ding ...

Diana gasped as she froze in place, stopped by the sudden noise. She had to strain to hear it over the blood pounding in her ears, but eventually, she was able to hear it clearly in the silent study as the slow chiming of the downstairs clock. Her eyes darted about the room, and she struggled not to let panic wrap its hand around her throat. *When did Colin say they would be coming home? Was it after midnight or before? Oh, heavens, I will be discovered!*

As quickly as possible, abandoning any hope of quiet, she frantically tried to replace everything just as it had been when she found it. Every second, her mind invented a dozen sounds of footsteps, doors opening, Uncle James crying out in wrath. Within a few long moments, her task was complete, just as her vision began to blur with fear.

Have I left any trace of this damnable, futile search for Lord-knows-what? Diana wondered, looking around the room once more. But now she was sure she really did detect the sound of a door closing somewhere distant, and she fled the room without further thought, only just remembering to close the door behind her.

Mercifully, Colin was still fast asleep when she reached her own bedroom safe and sound. Even more blessedly, Diana's voice of common sense had the wisdom not to complain as she climbed back into bed right where she had first fallen asleep.

I've looked through his study, then, and discovered nothing at all. Diana felt her heart finally slow its frantic tattoo in her chest, terror supplanted by growing despair. *What in heaven's name am I to do now?*

She felt Colin sleepily crane his head forward and plant a soft kiss against her cheek. Her thoughts quieted, her heart humming a soft lullaby in their place, and their slow, steady breathing mingled together into an idyllic harmony of slumber.

Chapter 17

Darker Clouds Gathering

“I just don’t understand why you can’t give him the benefit of the doubt for once!”

“Benefit of the doubt? Hah!” Diana’s laugh was mirthless, biting. “I may as well give him that much, too, since he’s taken everything else from me!”

“Marriage is something you must consider at some point. I know it chafes you, but—”

“At some point, Colin, yes. My parents are not yet cold in the ground, but you and your stepfather seem to be in some terrific hurry to push me into matrimony while I am still in the depths of my grief.”

“It’s been *months*, Diana,” Colin protested. Her mouth snapped shut, brows furrowing with anger. “I know it still hurts, but it’s not as though you’re being shipped off to a stranger’s house the day after your parents’ death. The world is cruel enough that it will not go on waiting for you forever.” The withering glance she sent in his direction confirmed that she had no easy rebuttal for this point, but he was no less wrong for having brought it up.

Colin rubbed his eyes, hoping he might be able to banish the headache that had been plaguing him since they first sat on the yellowing grass beneath the Hanging Tree. For a moment, he blackly wondered

whether whatever damned soul had ended his life beneath this tree had done so on account of a stubborn woman.

“Diana ...” he started, reaching to hold her hand. She folded her arms to thwart this gesture, but he decided her continued presence beside him was enough leave to continue. “Diana, I just want to help you understand that what my stepfather is doing for you is the same as what he’s done for my mother and me. I know it might seem cruel, but —”

Diana had had enough of listening by this point. “But it’s for my own good, is it? My uncle, whom I scarcely ever met before my parents’ death, is much better equipped to make decisions about my own life?”

“Frankly, yes.” Colin could tell from her appalled reaction that he had made a misstep but could think of nothing to do but go on. “Sir James Leeson knows more than you—than either of us, than anyone our age—about what one needs to survive in this world. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that the ton is a treacherous thing. One misstep could mean personal ruination. You need to be aware of all manner of ancient alliance and financial situations and ... and family reputations!”

“None of which is relevant if my guardian is thinking of his own advancement rather than my best interests.”

“He’s built himself up from nothing,” Colin exhorted her, ignoring her barbed comment. “He went from having not a penny to his name to being an important London gentleman, all through nothing more than his own hard work and business acumen—”

“And a good share of money from my mother and father. Don’t forget that.”

Colin seethed, fighting not to roll his eyes. *This again.* At times, he felt Diana was simply waiting for an opportunity to repeat this calumny she had overheard from her friend Mister Arnold. “Blast it, Diana, whatever his circumstances, Sir James knows what one needs to succeed in this world. Like it or not, the law says that a woman cannot inherit her parents’ property, and she needs a husband if she is to participate in our society.”

“What if the law is wrong?” Diana snapped. “What if it’s bloody foolish that a woman is kept in bondage to a man, any man, who may be a bigger fool than she herself? You’ve known some right idiots, Colin ... does that strike you as in any way just?”

“No, in fact. It can be terribly unjust. The law is like that, sometimes. But must you fight a philosophical battle, one you have no hope of winning, against your own guardian just because you do not like the law?”

“If my guardian is the one imposing this wrongdoing upon me? How could you even think otherwise?”

Diana fixed him with a scathing look, one that cut Colin in a way he had not anticipated. “You are an intelligent man, Colin.”

“Thank you,” he cut in, though his heart was not with the joke that had so neatly presented itself. He looked away, his eyes examining the trio of crows that had descended on the limb of a nearby tree to sound their mournful calls.

“But somehow, you have determined someone in your own house is exempt from the reason and cunning I see you turn on every other subject on God’s earth. Why is that, Colin? I know your stepfather has been good to you and your mother—or you say he has, at least. But surely one act of generosity does not vindicate other bad acts.”

He turned back to Diana, his eyes growing hot with anger. “Diana, if you mean to impugn the good character of Sir James Leeson, after he has done so much for—”

She stopped him with a raised hand. “I’m doing no such thing, Colin. I am speaking only of his actions towards me, not his character in general. Can you really look me in the eye and tell me that you honestly believe he wants nothing more than to secure my safety and happiness for the future? Even if it means a lifetime of marital misery with Mister Gerard Dull?”

Colin opened his mouth to confirm this characterisation, then closed it again, unable to agree with her charge and infuriated at himself for this inability. “Mister Dull—I mean *Dunn* ...” Colin fumbled. “He is not a bad sort for a third son of a wealthy family. I’ve known far worse—”

“He’s not a bad sort for a perfectly serviceable silver tea service if not nearly as well-spoken,” Diana quipped. Colin stifled a laugh, trying to maintain what meagre ground he still had in the argument. But now, he could see the tears gathering in Diana’s eyes, and he felt his reason flee his mind completely.

“Don’t you ...?” she began to ask, then stopped with what looked like tremendous effort. *Is there really something the woman thinks that she dares not say?* Colin thought with bitter wonder. *Whatever might it be ...?*

Shaking her head, Diana continued, "Marriage is not just some business arrangement for the sake of distant relatives, Colin. It's a real decision that affects the real life of real people. Whoever it is I marry, I must spend all the rest of my days with him.

Don't you think love—real, *true* love—is worth at least seeking in such an endeavour before abandoning in favour of money and security? Even if it's impossible to find such a thing more than once—or even just once," she hastily appended, "isn't it a perfect enough good in this horrid world that it's worth fighting for?"

Grunting with frustration, he cast about, struggling to find the right words—something that had rarely if ever happened to befall him for his entire life until meeting Diana Hann. Now it seemed a daily occurrence for him to entirely lose control over his tongue, whether in a maddening argument like this or finding himself transfixed by the beauty of her lovely face in the gold of the early morning sunlight. His eyes roved to the rainclouds beginning to gather on the distant horizon, presaging more dramatic weather in their near future.

At last, he fell upon something that sounded reasonable. "Life ..." Colin began, lifting a hand in an indistinct gesture. "Diana, life is not some storybook romance, you know. It's a hard, practical thing, and it must be dealt with practically."

Diana leaned back as if struck, a hateful look roiling in her pure blue eyes. "Those are James Leeson's words, Colin," she said in a voice dripping with ice.

"I don't ... Diana, I'm not—" Colin protested. Then he found a crumb of indignation somewhere in himself and drew himself straight, an imperious sneer finding purchase on his lip. "And what if they are?"

The man has more than his share of wisdom, as I've said. You could learn something if you ever bothered to put aside your own self-righteousness long enough to—"

But now Diana had lurched to her feet and was looking down at Colin disdainfully. The shadow of the Hanging Tree had painted a menacing shadow over her fair features. "I did not come out here with you to hear my guardian's abuses repeated to me for the thousandth time. If that is all you care to do, you can bloody well do it without me here."

Here Colin found his mind ready with an appropriately cutting rejoinder, one that would put Diana in her place without a doubt ... but his heart stilled his tongue before it could lash out this invective, perhaps sensing that he did not want Diana in any place but where she had just been sitting. Another retort came to him, then another, each crueller than the last, but nothing exited Colin's lips but an ineffectual choking sound.

Before he could unleash anything suitably witty but not too vicious for his own good, Diana had disappeared out of sight, leaving the grass beneath the Hanging Tree once again grey and cold and very, very empty.

* * *

Colin's love and admiration for his stepfather were very real, but they did not generally extend to Sir James Leeson's famous study. The room was too small for Colin's taste, especially for all the papers and books that filled every surface in the chamber. It was too warm and smoky in the winter as well, and in the summer, there were times Colin felt he was sure to suffocate in the choking heat on his frequent visits with the gentleman.

However, for all its faults, the study had two charms that precisely suited Colin's current mood: it was unoccupied by Diana, and it was stocked with a dozen bottles of his stepfather's wine.

Trying to force himself to chuckle at the gesture, Colin raised his second glass in the air in a toast, though it was already half-empty. "To true love, whether or not it does ever coincide with matrimony," he said in a grandiose voice, then drained the remaining red liquor.

Whatever 'true love' means, he thought with a sniff. He ran a finger over the rim of the empty glass, idly filling the room with a persistent squeaking noise. If it's something that even exists outside the pages of ridiculous novels.

Colin laughed again at the thought, the sound bitter and cold even within his chest. *So much time and effort spent on seeking something that doesn't even exist. What is this thing the poets call 'love', anyway? Simple desire, lust, pleasurable companionship with a compatible personality?* He snorted. *If that's all, then whatever I've been doing with Diana might be called something similar. Imagine spending one's whole life chasing a feeling as commonplace and unimportant as ...*

If there was any warning of Sir James' sudden appearance in the doorway, Colin missed it over the sound of his own thoughts. So when he heard the first harsh baritone syllable shoot into the study like cannon fire, he was so surprised that he sat bolt upright so hard he hurt his neck, nearly spilling his glass in his haste to set it on the table and correct his lugubrious posture

"There you are, Colin. Blazes, I was looking for you all bloody morning!"

As ever, Sir James entered the room like a storm cloud, full of bluster and wrath directed in every direction at once. Muttering to himself, the great man pushed his way to his desk, rifling through papers for a moment without apparently looking for anything in particular. Colin noted the man's eye land on the half-finished glass of wine on the table, on the slightly askew curtains, on the cleanliness of his boots resting anxiously on the floor, before finally alighting on the bottle of wine.

"May I pour you a glass, sir?" Colin asked brightly.

Sir James' face was lined and red with scorn. "Awfully generous of you, offering me a glass of my own wine," he growled. Colin shrank, feeling his veins run cold with fear, but he smoothly filled the empty glass that his stepfather held out in his direction.

"I ... I'm sorry, Sir James. I didn't mean to—"

"Never mind that, now," barked the gentleman, quaffing half of his glass and making a face of mild disgust. "You know you're welcome in this study anytime, Colin, and that includes all the comforts therein. For God's sake, don't make me say it another hundred times."

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Good lad." By the tone of his voice, Colin could tell that James had already moved on mentally from this topic. Now he occupied himself with scowling in the direction of his account books, one finger running through the bushy hairs of his moustache. From the dark circles under the man's eyes, it was evident that something had been troubling him.

“What ... er, why were you looking for me, sir?”

Sir James glared at him, a patina of surprise under his perpetually furrowed eyebrows.

“This morning, that is. What was it you wanted me for?”

“Oh, Devil knows,” Sir James grumbled, refilling his glass, then pouring the rest of the bottle into Colin’s. “I tell you, Colin, I don’t know what’s become of you of late. Here I am, hard at work at affairs of business from sunrise, and you’re nowhere to be found. Have I not made it sufficiently clear that I see it as my duty to instruct you in the matters a gentleman must know?”

“Yes, sir, you have. Thank you, s—”

“I could do with much less of your bloody thanks and more of your attention if you’ve any to hand.” Sir James leaned forward in his low chair, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked Colin over from head to toes. Colin struggled not to shudder at the intensity of his stepfather’s gaze. “I’ve always known you as a diligent young man. A bit too given to enjoying life’s idle pleasures, perhaps, but never a slugabed.”

“Thank you, sir.” Colin winced as soon as he said the words, fearing further chastisement from Sir James. But his previous caution was already forgotten, evidently.

“So just what is it you’ve been doing with yourself each morning? Mister Davenport tells me you’ve been entertaining yourself with frequent walks in the garden—for what reason I cannot begin to guess. What’s been keeping you so damnably occupied these days, Colin?”

Colin’s mind raced, struggling to invent any answer that might not enrage his stepfather. All his stubborn, overworked brain could supply was repeating the question to himself in an infuriated tone. *What have I been doing with myself?* His imagination was filled with a dozen intensely passionate encounters with Diana in the gardens. Certainly these were no way for a rational man to behave, putting aside his responsibilities so he could indulge in idle lust.

... And that’s certainly what it has been, and nothing more, Colin thought, swallowing what felt like a mouthful of broken glass as he did so.

Fortunately, before he could devise a suitable answer, Sir James waved a hand dismissively, already impatient to be moving on from this subject. “Well, whatever business it is you’ve been wasting your time at, it’s long past time for it to come to a stop. Drinking with that idiot friend Radcliffe, out carousing in the streets of London, and God knows where else ... man is not ruled by his base impulses, Colin! You should know that by now; I’m certain I’ve told you a thousand times already.”

“You have,” Colin said, swallowing hard. “I do.”

“Then you’d bloody well act like it!” Sir James snarled. “It’s well past time for you to put aside childish whimsy and get to the business of earning your way in this world. For God’s sake, life isn’t some storybook romance! It’s a practical thing, Colin.”

“And it must be dealt with practically.”

James nodded curtly at the conclusion of this truism. Then, in a somewhat uncharacteristic turn, James looked away from Colin and morosely downed his entire glass of wine in one long draught. This was a sign that Colin could not ignore; something was truly wrong with the grand gentleman.

“Is there ... something wrong, sir?” Colin asked as he rose to take another bottle of wine from the sideboard. Trying to fight the urge to wince that came when Sir James looked in his direction—Colin had been bitterly recriminated when he had previously implied something might be amiss with his stepfather’s mood—he lifted the bottle to display the label. When he was given no criticism but instead a distant nod, he opened the bottle and filled both their glasses quietly.

“It’s nothing new,” said Sir James grandly, as though speaking of history’s greatest injustice. “Only the same mistreatment that your poor stepfather is made to endure every day of his life by a god that has nothing better to do than to constantly mock and test His most promising subject.”

Colin blinked as he listened attentively to his stepfather carry on about this subject, as he frequently did. For the most part, he spoke in generalities, referring to business partners and enterprises about which Colin knew little. Sir James was forever protesting his treatment by the gentry and the mercantile class alike, considering every missed opportunity a personal slight by a cabal of men who were intent on keeping him from rising any higher in London society. As far as Colin had heard, Sir James was looked down upon by everyone in the city, if not the whole Empire, despite his having done such tremendous good works for all mankind. To hear his usual telling of it, he was constantly beset by jealous, small-minded miscreants,

something that by now Colin knew better than to question.

But as one glass of wine was anxiously drained, then another, then another still, it became increasingly clear that Sir James was bothered by something more particular than his usual affairs. Seeing the hunted look in his stepfather's eyes, the frantic energy with which he ran his fingers through his stringy hair, Colin could not help himself but ask. "Is it anyone ... in particular, sir? Who's troubling you, I mean."

Sir James glowered at his stepson, but he answered all the same. "It's that Mister Cavendish down in Southampton." He sneered as he thrust a finger in the air. "Up-jumped fishmonger with nothing better to do than stand in my way ... I tell you, Colin, he's almost as bad as that no-good brother-in-law of mine. That blasted William Hann ... he and my wicked sister Catherine truly deserved one another almost as much as they deserved their fate for all the evil they brought into the world with their every breath."

Colin felt his breath catch in his throat. In all his years in this house, he had rarely heard his stepfather even mention his family, and it had never been with such vitriol. "Diana's parents, you mean?"

The man nodded, though, from his eyes, Colin could see he was only half-listening. "They always thought they were so much better than me, you know. Always putting on airs, always looking down on James Leeson, as though I were beneath them. Hah!"

He spat a fat glob of red sputum onto the carpet. "They never understood me, never understood who I was. I had to show them, had to teach them that James Leeson is beneath nobody. *Nobody.*"

It was a sinister look that burned in Sir James' eyes as his mind

gleefully pored over whatever he was remembering. He seemed to forget Colin was present for a long moment, and Colin's breath still did not come.

It felt as though Colin's heart had been seized by a cold, dead hand. For a long while, he wondered what would become of his body if his heart never pumped again ... but then it returned to its task and James Leeson to his broad complaints of the unjustness of the world at large. Eventually, the last of the wine was drunk just as Colin and James themselves were, and the older man dismissed his stepson as he returned to some business at his desk. Colin put on what he hoped was a passable look of unquestioning filial devotion and stumbled back to his room to fall asleep.

But sleep did not come, exhausted though he was. As the darkened room spun gently around him, the same question swirled within Colin over and over again for hours.

What was Sir James talking about, needing to teach his sister who he really is?

Chapter 18

No More Flowers

Compared to his stepfather's study, Colin had always possessed a keen fondness for his own private study, small though it was. Really it was little more than a narrow enclave, too small to use for anything but an office for a particularly menial or narrow-shouldered clerk. Sir James had given him the space when he was only nine years old, and Colin had risen to the challenge by keeping it an orderly, efficient little study.

The study's position just to the side of the house's grand entryway meant visitors were forever wandering into it, assuming it was a cloakroom or necessary; while this was an unfortunately common occurrence, Colin felt this drawback was more than made up for by his opportunity to idly monitor the comings and goings of the house without being noticed.

Even in recent years, he found himself spending many happy hours reading or writing letters in his worn-down chair, feet often as not propped up on his little desk with his back pressed against the back wall. Of late, his stepfather had made some small noise about moving Colin to a setting more befitting the presumptive heir to the Leeson fortune but had never followed through with this proposition. In no hurry to bid farewell to this rare private space, Colin had not pushed the matter.

Today, however, there was no pleasure to be had in the little study, no pleasurable hours of reading nor idle scratching of verse in the margins of wrinkled newspapers. In fact, today, the room felt less a hermitage to Colin than a tomb, one occupied not only by a handsome young rake years before his time but by a malevolent ghost that haunted his every thought.

Sir James is an important man and must be treated as such, Colin thought, his head resting petulantly against his fist. It's no surprise that he would not wish to make it broadly known that his sister did not treat him well. And even if he does possess an imposing aspect, that does not mean he was implying anything untoward. It is only right that a man teach respect to those who lack such a quality. Especially as great a man as Sir James Leeson, who has demonstrated his generosity and kindness a thousand times in his life.

Colin had considered these thoughts dozens if not hundreds of times over the previous twelve hours. By now, he had nearly convinced himself of their unvarnished veracity. Not that this improved his mood a single jot.

He leaned back in his chair with a mournful sigh, joylessly resting his feet on his scuffed and worn writing desk. *I'm accomplishing nothing by spending all day running over the same blasted comment. What I need is something to take my mind off of it.* Closing his eyes, he found himself wondering what Diana might be doing at this moment—the only subject that seemed to occur to him over the last several weeks.

She had not been at breakfast that morning, and Davenport had mentioned she had some manner of social engagement, so Colin was left to his own devices for some hours now. He shifted in his seat, feeling his blood pump a degree or two warmer as he wondered whether they might meet in the garden later in the day for another thrilling exploration amid the last of the summer flowers.

Then his eyes opened, an irritated expression on his face as he recalled their argument under the Hanging Tree the previous day. This was not their first spat, to be sure, but he felt a cloak of guilt settle over his shoulders at the memory. *When did my life become so bloody dismal?*

A distant sound echoed in Colin's ear, one that was familiar enough in this room that he often failed to notice it ... at least, at moments when he was less eager for distraction. Footsteps, the front door swinging open, a muffled greeting, then louder footsteps in the opposite direction. Craning his head forward, he caught a glimpse of none other than Gerard Dunn striding down the hallway, his head held high.

Here's a bit of diversion, then. Just what I needed, thought Colin, rising from his chair and stalking out into the corridor after the lanky young man.

"If you're looking for the aviary, I'm afraid it's closed to visitors," Colin quipped, leaning casually against the wall. Dunn jumped in surprise at Colin's appearance, and Colin chuckled as the man spun and glared in his direction.

"Eh? What's that?" Dunn barked, predictably confused.

Colin shrugged, his arms held out and an apologetic smile on his lips. "You see, Sir James asked the resident birds, and it seems none of them are receiving anyone at the moment. If you're hungry, I'm sure I could ask in the kitchen if they can scrape up a dish of seed for you, or perhaps a nice spray of m—"

"I'm sorry, Mister Mullen," Gerard interrupted, "but I'm afraid I'm a bit confused about something. Perhaps you could clarify it for me." There was an attempt at an intimidating scowl on the man's face, its effect undercut by the visible shaking of his knees.

“It’s Mullens,” Colin muttered, his smile vanishing from his lips.

Raising a finger in an unclear gesture, Gerard nearly spat, “You are not Miss Hann’s guardian, are you? A—and you do not make decisions on behalf of her actual guardian? Sir James Leeson?”

“That ... is correct.” Colin folded his arms, not liking where the man was going with this line of enquiry.

“In fact, you are in no way Miss Hann’s family, or have any, er, entitlement to her in any way?”

Colin saw red and opened his mouth in protest. “I don’t—” But then the weight of Dunn’s implication struck him, and he was too angry and perplexed to continue the sentence. Instead, he raised his chin and gave an imperious sneer.

Gerard evidently took this as a confirmation and dropped his shoulders, smirking in victory. “Then we have agreed that I am to marry Diana Hann, sir. And you are not. That being the case, I would ask you to please stay the hell out of my way—*our* way. Diana’s and mine.” And with that, he turned on his heel and continued his birdlike march toward the grand salon of the house, leaving Colin standing there in virtual apoplexy.

Just as I had thought there was no way I could dislike this man any more than I already did ...

He considered following the man and giving him the verbal thrashing Dunn was so clearly in need of, but instead found his feet carrying

him towards the staircase. Though he was unsure where he was going, he knew he needed to put as much distance as possible between himself and the wretched suitor.

Something about Dunn's choice of words had struck Colin in a vulnerable part of himself, and now it worried at him like a grain of sand. Whatever comment the man had made about Colin not being the one to marry Diana was obviously nothing more than the remark of an ignoramus; as such, he could safely disregard it completely. But there was still something about his less mad statements that grated on Colin.

No entitlement to Diana ... as though the opinion of a valued friend, someone who truly knows her and appreciates her for who she is and I— He stopped himself, unsure of the thought that had passed through his mind there. Mister Dunn's ridiculous comment must have stuck deeper in Colin's craw than he had realised.

Who has real affection for her, Colin finished, nodding at this more correct characterisation. His spine straightened at the thought that entered his head, a plan already coming to mind. *Well, we shall see whether the opinion of such a person truly carries no weight in this house. If I am indeed a friend to Diana, the least I can do is try to speak up for my friend's desires.*

Colin resolved then and there to take up the matter with his stepfather at the first opportunity ... only to find himself already standing outside the door of his stepfather's study. The sight turned the steel in his spine to jelly, and he waffled back and forth between fleeing and ending this bad business immediately.

"For God's sake, Colin, don't loiter in the doorway," boomed Sir James' voice from his writing desk. "Come in if you must, or leave me alone to tend to more important affairs."

For whatever reason, it was the bolder option that won out, and with great alacrity, Colin shuffled onto the carpet before his stepfather's desk. He waited until Sir James turned to face him, abandoning whatever he had been writing with an exasperated sigh.

"Sir—" Colin began to say.

"I shall infer that you have not come here to receive my tutelage in important business matters, Colin, as I have not invited you here for any such education today," James snapped. "That means that whatever it is, it's less pressing than affairs of real import."

"It ... yes, sir," Colin said meekly, wondering why he had bothered to entertain this foolish meddling in the first place. The image of Gerard Dunn flashed through his mind.

Sir James gave a single nod, and with an irritable twitch of his moustache, he turned back towards his writing desk. Colin could picture Gerard Dunn jamming a ring onto Diana's finger, see him lean forward to kiss her, ignoring her expression of helpless revulsion ...

"But this is still important," Colin protested. He could not tell who was more surprised that he was testing his stepfather's patience, James or himself. "Sir. Even if it's ... not as important, sir, it still ... it requires your attention."

Sir James folded his arms in what struck Colin then as a depressingly familiar gesture. His mouth compressed into a thin line, he reluctantly nodded, then growled, "Let's have it, then."

“I only ... I was thinking that ... whether ... that is, with regard to your charge, and her future ...” Sir James regarded him impatiently, and Colin felt a tremor of fear run down his back. *Get a hold of yourself, damn it!*

Steeling himself with a deep breath, Colin finally managed to get it out. “Are you really sure that Gerard Dunn is the best option for Diana?”

As soon as he squeezed out this question, Colin quickly sorted through the evidence he had collected to answer the question of Dunn as a romantic prospect, ensuring he was ready to put his arguments forth in a compelling fashion. There was the questionable probability of Mister Dunn receiving a sufficient portion of his father’s fortune—as a third son of a relatively young father, he was not likely to inherit much money at all, and even that not for many years.

There was the man’s as yet uncertain position in London society, which would presumably be a liability to Diana and any of their future children. Perhaps most important of all, at least to Colin’s mind, there was Diana’s own opinion on the matter, something the household had certainly learned she would not meekly swallow but would use to give ferocious battle.

But there was no need for any of it. Before he could give voice to the first of these objections, Sir James had already given his answer, a curt “Yes,” then turned back to his accounts books without another thought.

There’s that icy hand on my heart once again. Colin cleared his throat, knowing it was futile to continue but unable to stop himself from

trying. “Sir, if I may, I don’t know if—”

“You may not.” James did not even deign to turn and face Colin now, instead speaking over his shoulder as he continued with whatever he was writing. “I’ve been good enough to give you my answer to this preposterous question, Colin. Now it is for you to be good enough to do as you’re told and leave me alone. Now.”

Colin did as he was bid without further question. At once, he was filled with remorse, wishing he had pushed himself to fight harder for Diana ... but faced with the terrifying visage of Sir James, he had been stunned into mute obedience. As *always*, he thought bitterly. As Colin stepped out the door into the corridor, he could not help wondering if Diana would ever forgive him or if he would ever see his stepfather the same way again.

* * *

The Leeson grounds were a very different place than they had been even a week before. The summer had at last finally, definitively begun to grind to a stop: the thousands of leaves that coloured the sky over the hills that stretched out to the horizon now bore the golden tinge of sunset at all hours of the day, and the flights of humming insects had flown off to wherever such creatures go at the end of the season.

The flowers that had dappled the grasses were turning brown and collapsing into brown piles of withered petals. Even the birds had a mournful note in their songs, heralding the end of the glorious season and announcing the incipient arrival of autumn.

On the little stone bench on which Colin and Diana had first launched their exploration of these strange, colourful waters, however, it might

still as well have been the glorious height of summer. Seated on their position, hidden from the other garden paths and the Leeson house by tall green hedges now bare of flowers, the two continued their expeditions into one another's bodies.

Diana took tiny, stifled sips of air, nearly overwhelmed by pleasure as Colin's fingers roved across hills and valleys never trod by another living soul. He shushed her gently, enjoying seeing the look of consternation on her face as she transmuted the moans that shook her body into near-silent convulsions. Frustrated, she brought her mouth against his, tugging gently at his dark hair as her tongue sought his as a moth quests for the light.

And Colin countered this manoeuvre with the slightest movement of his fingers against her upper thigh, her waist, her most secret parts concealed beneath her lilac-coloured skirt. He smiled, relishing how he rendered her insensible with such a tiny gesture. It was a duel so like and so unlike their frequent verbal battles—endless, flawless, desperate, full of hushed desire and every ounce of intelligence and effort their souls could bear.

Like all wonderful things, though, this too had to come to an end sooner or later. Even as the golden sun touched the treetops and drank their orange hue into its perfect, complete circle, the lovers lay back to breathe and gaze off into the distance. They panted, satisfied and blissful in one another's company, Diana's head resting against Colin's shoulder, their fingers intertwined and resting idly on her lap. For a moment, there was nothing but companionable contentment, and the lingering shared fantasy of how many sunsets like this there might be in all their possible futures.

But only for a moment. Then what had transpired earlier that day reared its ugly head, and Colin's old, familiar mask slipped back into place.

"I should wager Mister Dull did not win such a reaction from you during your tea this morning," Colin said with a chuckle.

Diana shared in his laugh, though he could sense that her participation was intended to humour him. "I suppose not," she said, looking up into his eyes as if to tell him she did not wish to pursue this topic of conversation.

"In fact, I find I can scarcely even imagine him engaged in such an activity with a woman," Colin went on, finding he could not stop himself from continuing this joke even as he realised it was in poor taste. "Can you even conceive of such a thing? Even assuming he bored poor Missus Fessler to sleep first—or whoever was compelled to chaperone your tea—he would doubtless do the same to you before he came within a foot of those lovely lips of yours."

Diana leaned away from him in her seat and withdrew her hand, crossing her legs to face away from him as she laughed light-heartedly. "You seem to be giving a great deal of thought to Mister Dull. Certainly more than I ever have."

"Hmm? What's that, now?"

She tapped her finger playfully against his mouth and shook her head, her golden locks shaking in an aura of shimmering sunlight. "Don't patronise me, good sir. You're no good at playing the fool. Why in the world are you thinking of Mister Dull when you have a beauty like me sitting nearly in your lap?"

"I ..."

Colin blew out a long, irritated sigh and raked his fingers through his curly dark hair. *Damn it all, whatever happened to my much-*

vaunted eloquence? “I spoke with my stepfather earlier today. I tried to impart to him how poor an idea it would be for you to be married to Gerard Dunn, whatever his reasoning might be.”

Diana sat straighter, a look of concern creasing her lovely features. “To what effect?”

He could only shake his head helplessly in reply. Any words he wished to speak would be untrue, and the truth was far too upsetting to give voice to.

She loosed a long, bitter sigh, and Colin could see her deflate by half her size out of the corner of his eye. He felt her fingers once again find his and she patted the back of his hand amiably if limply. “Thank you for trying, Colin. I appreciate you making the effort.”

“Hah.” He chuckled morosely. “For all the good it did.”

The two gazed off at the sunset again, their eyes lingering on the dark silhouettes of birds making their final flights of the evening. Colin found himself idly considering staring directly at the dying sun for as long as he could bear. *A senseless act of self-destruction, to be sure, but at least Diana’s fate would not be alone in undergoing such an act*, he thought. As long as he was allowing himself to wallow in such maudlin fantasies, he considered that blinding himself might be a blessing; he was not sure he could bear to see the sadness on Diana’s face once she was miserably married to Mister Dull.

“There’s no escaping it, is there?” Diana asked into the sun.

Colin shook his head helplessly. Then he heard a sniffle come from the lovely young woman at his side and was seized by a sudden overwhelming urge to comfort her however he could. Hardly knowing what ideas were coming to his mind, he reached out to rub her back with one hand and said softly, "Marriage, I understand, is not always an easy thing. In fact, even discounting half of what I overhear at some of London's gentleman's clubs, it seems that for nearly everyone it is a most difficult matter. It takes a constant effort to build a partnership that both parties can live with, let alone be happy in."

Colin felt himself nearly cry out in despair at what he was saying, but he forced his mask into an approximation of an encouraging smile. Delicately he put one finger under Diana's chin and brought her face up to look him in the eyes, resisting the urge to wipe away a solitary tear that was tumbling down her cheek.

"But you have something few—no, that no one else has." He smiled as wide as he could, and into her wondering eyes he spoke, "You have all the intelligence, strength, and terrifying power of Diana Hann. And whatever fate may send your way, I pity whatever and whoever stands in your way."

Diana laughed beautifully, tears spilling down over her cheeks as she did so. Then she reached out and embraced Colin as tightly as she ever had before, and he held onto her like every happy dream he had ever let slip away.

"I'm sure you and he will be very happy together," Colin murmured into the crown of Diana's head. He hoped by some miracle he sounded more convincing aloud than he did in his own mind.

Diana's response was quiet enough that it disappeared almost immediately, like a handful of ash scattering in the wind. "I'm ... sure we will," she answered, and he reeled at the heart-breaking echo of

his own unconvincing words.

They breathed in a long, tenuous breath at the same time, and they watched the last of the summer's daylilies at last curl and turn brown there in their private garden.

Chapter 19

A Most Distasteful Plot

Something was the matter; she was sure of it. Uncle James had always been difficult to take, especially with Diana trying her best to circumspectly thwart his plans for her at every opportunity ... but of late he had been even more ill-tempered, his eyes red from lack of sleep, his wine glass more frequently refilled. His hair was greasy, as though he had been forgetting to bathe, and his sausage-like fingers had been drumming on the table as often as not.

Dinner that evening he had vowed that she would see herself engaged to Gerard Dunn within the next fortnight and had raged at her that he meant it this time before she could even raise her voice in protest. Colin, as had been his wont of late, had just adopted the same empty gaze as his mother Priscilla, and the two had dispassionately eaten their food even as Diana was reduced to tears before her guardian's abuse.

So she was on her own, as she always had been since coming here. That meant returning to her place on the top landing of the stairs, a means of spying she had only inconsistently kept to in all her confusion with Colin over the previous weeks.

It was growing late in the evening, and Diana's feet were beginning to hurt from standing sentinel for so long. From her position there at the top of the stairs, she could see the entire corridor through a crack in the stairway door and hear the inside of the study clearly. In two hours, no one had approached his study, nor had she heard a word from the man himself, nor any sound but the usual ceaseless scratching of a pen on paper.

What is it he even spends all day and night writing in there? This is useless, she thought, stretching her sore neck to one side. Her mind roved to the thought of Colin, who had told her he would visit her in her room later that night, after everyone else had gone to bed. *That will be in only another hour or so.* Diana smiled at the thought, remembering their previous encounter in that room, then grimaced. Did she even want him to come and see her, considering how clearly he had staked himself on the side of her wicked guardian?

Diana sniffed, her nose wrinkling at a distasteful yet strangely familiar smell that wafted into her hideaway in the stairwell. *Where have I encountered this scent before?* she asked herself, drawing in more of the smell and trying to ignore how it was beginning to turn her stomach. *It's like a woody sort of smoke, almost wet. And there is something sour about it as well ...*

A soft knocking sound drew Diana's eye out the door into the second-storey corridor. Peering through the narrow crack in the door, she saw a short, wide man in a red shirt and shabby brown hat approach the door of Uncle James' study. His hands were in his pockets, lips smacking absentmindedly, but there was something unmistakably menacing in the short man's bearing even as he knocked and waited to be let in.

That's the man I heard speaking with Uncle James that night a few weeks ago! she thought, her heart thumping in her breast with a potent mix of fear and excitement. *I couldn't hear the man's voice, but Uncle James called him ... Bertrand, didn't he? Oh, what was it he said to him that so rang alarm bells for me?*

Breathlessly, eyes still poised at the crack, she prayed that Bertrand would neglect to close the door behind him so she could hear their conversation more clearly. She could see the man look around the corridor as he waited for Uncle James' answer, rocking back and forth

on his heels and casting avaricious looks at the ornaments that hung from the walls. His dull, dark eye seemed to land right on Diana, and she felt herself stifle a cry of fear, sure she had been discovered.

Then the door was thrown open, and Bertrand disappeared through the doorway, fortunately leaving it slightly ajar behind him. Diana put her ear against the slightly open door between the corridor and the stairway, hoping she might pick up the men's conversation. At first, she could hear nothing but the sound of her own frantic breathing, but her ears quickly picked up the aggravated speech that echoed out the study door.

"... care for me to speak to you, squire?" asked the short man in a hoarse voice with a thick dialect Diana did not recognize.

"I'd prefer you don't address me at all, Bertrand."

"Don't have none of your good wine to share with a guest?"

"With you? Don't make me laugh. What the hell do you want?"

Diana could hear Bertrand grunt as he sat heavily in one of the study's chairs. "Y'see, squire, it's not about my wants. I'm an amiable man, just like you. I don't want for much in this life—"

"Quickly, please, Bertrand. I've better things to do than entertain crooks like you."

“That may be so, squire; it may be. But you see, you may remember these certain mutual friends from a recent business venture. I’m afraid they’re good at what they do, but they’re terribly hard to please. Expensive tastes, you see.”

“Devil take you and your friends, man! If it’s money you’re after, I told you already that I still can’t get you any more. Not while that little brat is still unmarried, at least.”

Diana felt a prickle run along the back of her neck. *He’s talking about me, isn’t he?*

“Brat? Oh, the girl, the one belonging to the couple whose carriage my friends fixed for you this past spring? Catherine and William, was it? Your cousins or something? Bloody thing, that little accident, squire.”

“Yes, yes, blast it, but keep your damned voice down.”

“That’s it, squire, you’ve got it now! You see, we’re talking about the same thing. Most distasteful business, all that, but it’s precisely the matter my friends are so concerned about. And not only are they hard to please, but I’m afraid they’re terrible impatient as well.”

“Well, they shall have to find somewhere else to vent their impatience. I’ll be passing on the rest of their payment for the job they completed as soon as I can get my hands on the whole inheritance, and not a minute sooner.”

Then a loud, insistent sound droned louder and louder, drowning out any other words spoken in Uncle James’ study. Scarcely able to draw a

breath, Diana turned away from the door, realising dimly that the sound was that of the blood rushing in her ears.

Did he ... was what I just heard ... a confession to murder?

Diana was so stricken by what she had heard that she scarcely had the awareness to hide herself when the evil imp named Bertrand made his exit from Uncle James' study. Distantly, as though viewing herself from the bottom of a well, she somehow stumbled down the stairs, returned to her room, and lay on her bed to stare helplessly at the ceiling.

He can't. He couldn't. He didn't. She blinked, unsure if she had done so even once for the past several minutes. Her mind raced over every word Uncle James had spoken in her presence, every conversation they had had, every note on every scrap of paper in his office.

I knew the man was mad for money ... but is he truly capable of having his own sister murdered for such a base, ordinary thing?

Over and over these thoughts swirled in Diana's mind, chasing one another past the inevitable certainty that Uncle James had ordered her parents to be killed so he could take their fortune.

She did not know if she had fallen asleep or was merely incapacitated by the weight of her own thoughts, but she jumped with surprise as she heard her doorknob begin to turn, then the door slid open as a dark shape rushed into her room and closed the door behind it.

"It's quite dark in here, you realise," she heard Colin's voice say softly,

laughter suspended in his words like bubbles in a glass of champagne. “I’m not sure if I should feel enticed or afraid of being ambushed. Either way, I clearly am not interrupting anything too pressing, as it is too dark to read in—”

“I need to tell you something, Colin.” Diana sat up on the end of her bed, her words cutting Colin’s repartee short. Though the only light in the room was the dim blue glow of the moon flooding in through the curtains, her eyes were sufficiently adjusted to the gloom that she could see on his face and in his bearing that he was unnerved by her words.

“What is it?” Colin asked, taking a seat on a footstool close by. There was a look of true, sincere concern on his face, and with a start, Diana realised how terribly this revelation would hurt him. Wrong-headed though he might be, Colin was devoted to his stepfather ... would she truly be the one to cause him such pain?

Then her mind fixed on the image of her mother’s lifeless body, lying amid the splinters of a crushed carriage. The blood rushed through her veins, her breath coming quickly with indignation. *No*, Diana thought, her fingers clenching in her lap. *I will not let justice go undone. Uncle James will not murder and rob his own family with abandon.*

So she told him all. There, in the dark stillness of her room, her voice quivering even as she fought to keep herself quiet so they would not be overheard from another room, Diana told Colin everything that had happened. She described how she had found a place from which she could eavesdrop, how she watched the villain called Bertrand enter Uncle James’ study, how she had overheard her guardian’s grisly confession. Through it all, Colin just stared at her, a finger rubbing his chin thoughtfully, his face a dispassionate mask.

Finally the thing was said, and Diana found herself rushing to devise

their next steps. "We must take action of some sort. Soon, perhaps right away. I imagine we must summon the law, though I should understand if you wish to do further investigation on the matter or speak with Sir James first."

Then Diana stopped, noting for the first time the cloud of anger that had settled on Colin Mullens.

"You couldn't have ... there must ..." Colin's face was turned away from her and veiled in shadow in his current position, but Diana could plainly tell how agitated he had become. She felt her own fears overrun by a powerful rush of guilt.

"I know how hard this is to accept. I know how good you say Sir James has been to you, and I wish more than anything that this had not happened ... for all our sakes. I'm sorry, Colin." Diana reached out a hand to him, gesturing for him to take it in his own.

He did not move to accept her hand but continued to cast around for a moment before meeting her gaze with a look of icy suspicion. "You did not hear any more of the conversation than those few words. Or ... or know the man to whom he was speaking."

Diana blew out a long, heavy sigh, feeling what little life she had left in her frame exit her body at the same moment. "You don't believe me," she muttered.

"I ... believe you overheard something, I suppose. The mind has a strange way of piecing together information to fit a conclusion that we already came to. I've done the same countless times." Colin's words were sympathetic, but his tone was as cold and empty as an open grave.

“I’m not imagining this, Colin,” Diana said through gritted teeth.

“I didn’t say you were.”

“Then you don’t believe that Sir James caused the death of my parents? Despite his confession to—”

“Of course I don’t bloody believe that!” Colin snapped, shooting to his feet. Diana shushed him gently, fearing his words would be audible from another room, but now his temper had slipped any leash. “My God, they could have been talking about anything at all, and you decide your own guardian is a criminal and a murderer on no more evidence than your own bloody suspicions?”

Diana felt her shoulders pull up, her mouth twist in a cruel snarl. “I told you Bertrand’s exact words, Colin. ‘The couple whose carriage my friends fixed for you.’ He said their names. What in God’s name is it you suggest they could have been talking about?”

“I know it may be a foreign concept to you, communicating with a complete absence of sarcasm,” Colin growled, “but did it even occur to you that this Bertrand fellow was talking about literal friends who literally repaired a carriage? It’s hardly illegal for a man to have a cartwright as a friend, even a poor one.”

“That’s preposterous, and you know it.”

“Then they were repeating a conversation they had overheard elsewhere, or ... or reciting the lines from a play!” Even in the dim blue light of the moon, she could see Colin’s consternation as he struggled to think of any plausible excuse. “Bloody hell, they could have been discussing anything in the world, Diana. Unless you are so proficient at espionage that you hear everything that goes on in this house, somehow?”

“Considering what I uncovered, I only wish that I had been paying even closer attention to Uncle James’ affairs!” Her voice rang from the ceiling—they were both nearly shouting now, she realised, but there was nothing she could do that would stem the tide of emotion. Instead, she scoffed in disbelief and went on. “Honestly, Colin, even if there has been some sort of misunderstanding, isn’t this at least worth looking into? If the man is capable of murdering his own sister, what else might he be plotting even now?”

“Circular reasoning. Now who’s being preposterous?”

Diana could not stop the contemptuous scowl from crossing her features. *He’s grasping at straws to defend the indefensible ... why have I put any of my trust in this man? I can’t decide which of us is more pathetic.* She stood but a few inches from Colin’s face, now ready and eager to voice every ounce of frustration she had experienced for the last several months.

“You are in such a rush to defend your beloved stepfather that you are not even listening to what I’m telling you!”

“Would you do any less if someone so important to you were being slandered in such a vile fashion?”

“It’s only slander if it’s untrue!”

“More circular reasoning. I had thought better of you, Diana,” Colin said smarmily. Then he folded his arms, his mouth split in the most horrendous, arrogant smirk Diana had ever seen. The sight filled her with unadulterated rage.

“I will allow that Sir James has been ... behaving a bit oddly since being named your guardian. Unreasonably, even,” he said in a slow, careful voice, as though speaking to a wild beast or a petulant child. “But murder? I’m sorry, Diana, but I know the man far better than you. He is simply not capable of such a thing; I’m sure of it.”

Diana felt her cheeks grow hot with fury. “If you would just remove your stepfather’s boot long enough to think about what I’m saying, you would understand how dire this situation truly is.”

“Are you really so eager to turn me against Sir James that one half-heard conversation is all it takes for you to leap to the one ridiculous conclusion that proves you right about everything?” He sniffed, looked away from her. “I suppose I should not be surprised—considering yourself correct does seem to be your one true passion in this life.”

“Then prove me wrong,” Diana said in an abrupt moment of clear thinking. “Confirm that I am wrong, that your stepfather is innocent of this crime, and I will speak of the matter no more.”

He did not even hesitate before he answered out of the corner of his mouth, “I have already made my opinion on this clear. This fantasy is yours, Diana. I will have naught to do with it.”

That's it. I can waste my time on this man no longer.

Every fibre of Diana's being cried out at the thought of what she must now do—of all the lonely mornings and excruciating nights that would now be devoid of the spark of light she had found in Colin Mullens—but she could no more refute this conclusion than she could turn back the tide. She drew herself straight, folding her arms and praying she would have the strength to follow through with the damnable task.

“If you will not hear what I have to say—or worse, if you hear it and it moves nothing at all within you,” Diana choked out, trying to stifle the tears that loomed menacingly at the back of her eyes. “Then I think you had better leave.”

“Finally, you begin to speak sense.” Colin turned away from her with a haughty sniff and strode purposefully toward the door. Each step he took sent another crack splintering deeper into Diana's heart, the pain quickly growing so great that she could not stop a whimper from escaping her lips.

“Don't misunderstand me, sir,” she croaked, following the man toward the door with her hands knotted into fists at her sides. “Don't think you can charm your way back into my ... my room. There will be no more diverting wordplay, no more idle arguments or walks in the garden.”

Colin stopped in place just long enough to turn back and snarl in her direction. “As is only right.”

“I want nothing more to do with you,” she continued in a low, menacing voice. “Not so long as you care more about using that mouth of yours to lick the boot of your abominable stepfather than speaking up in the defence of someone who ... who cares for you.” It felt that a nail was driven into her flesh with each syllable she voiced. Yet she could not bring herself to stop, desperate to lash out and inflict some of the pain she was feeling upon the source of her anguish.

There was a flash of something in those horrible, beautiful green eyes. A slip of the mask, once more, revealing unfathomable pain. But then it vanished, replaced by a look of cruel wrath that could only have been learned at the feet of James Leeson. And without another word, nor even a nod, Colin turned away and did as he was told.

Diana collapsed on the floor the moment she heard the door close. Her body was wracked with sobs as she felt more alone than she had ever been in her life.

Chapter 20

Unspoken Malefactions

The sun shone merrily on that early autumn morning. Yet for Colin Mullens, the day was black as pitch; all the light was utterly, heart-rendingly gone from his world. He carried about in his daily routine, and though he interacted with his mother and the staff, he felt utterly and terribly alone, with only his endlessly repeating thoughts to keep him company.

Ridiculous. Childish, even.

Breakfast was a quiet, extraordinarily dull affair, to the point where Colin wondered how he had ever been able to stand such boredom. Knowing how stubborn Diana could be, he did not expect her to join him that morning, but all the same, he found himself jumping at every errant sound, craning his neck to see if he could spy her approaching the dining room from down the corridor.

I had not believed her capable of such petulance.

Even as he carried on with the empty motions of keeping himself alive and his obligations reasonably fulfilled, Colin was hardly aware of what he was doing; the fog of thought that surrounded him was so damnably thick. Dimly, he saw that he had left for a solitary walk through the gardens after breakfast. This realisation filled him to overflowing with regret, each familiar sight among the yellowing trees transformed into an object of revulsion.

How many hours did I squander in this garden when I could have been doing something, anything else with my time? What a terrible waste.

He was unsure how much time he spent at his desk in his miniature office that day or what words he spent on Adam Radcliffe, who had stopped by for a brief visit and departed some time thereafter. All Colin knew was that each time he looked at the clock, it seemed to show the same time; each second of fretting elongated into a purgatory of shame.

I would never have suspected Diana might be capable of such manipulation, such wickedness. More fool, I.

Not recognising the letter he had apparently begun writing some time before, Colin screwed up the paper and threw it against the wall in a fit of impotent rage. If he had hoped this venting of his spleen would make him feel better, he was proven immediately wrong; neither was his mood improved by sweeping a stack of books off his desk onto the floor, or by hurling a cheap glass ornament against the wall to shatter into a deadly rain on the floor.

No, Colin mused as he listlessly cleaned up the debris from this tantrum; there was only one way he might address the source of his depression, he knew. Just as he knew with complete certainty that he would not take such action.

Investigate Sir James. As if such a nervous fantasy as the hateful venom Diana was spreading would even be worth entertaining.

“Ah, Colin. Come in, my boy, share a glass with me.”

Colin winced, seeing that his traitorous feet had moved to do what his mind had refused. "Yes, sir," he answered dutifully, though he felt disgusted with himself for yielding to whatever contrary impulse had guided him here. He could see Sir James hastily close the safe door by his feet, then turn in his chair and welcome Colin with a fatherly smile.

In short order, Colin had resumed his usual position in the seat nearest Sir James and had poured them each a glass of wine. Colin noted that despite his stepfather's agitated demeanour, which seemed even graver than usual on this day, the man had not yet opened a bottle of wine for himself that day.

"Too busy to dull my senses with drink, my boy," Sir James growled pleasantly, noticing Colin's eye rove about the room. "I was in the middle of ..." He stopped and glanced briefly at the safe beneath his desk, then shook his head lightly. "Besides, your mother has talked me into having our blasted autumn ball this evening, and if I imbibe too much too early, I might do something foolish like tell our guests what I really think of them. Can't have that, eh?"

Colin matched his stepfather's smile, though it felt like running his fingernails against glass. *He doesn't really think these parties of his are for Mother's sake, does he?* echoed in Colin's mind. *She cannot stand listening to Sir James' flunkies kiss his behind in pursuit of whatever monetary or social favour they are hoping for. And the autumnal ball has always been a particularly grotesque example of his fishing for praise and admiration.*

As he amiably listened to Sir James carry forth with his usual recitation of grievances with his various acquaintances and business partners, an idea occurred to Colin. Like all the worst ideas, this one was thorny enough that it would not dislodge from his mind even after half an hour and two glasses of wine, so finally, he relented and

gave it voice.

“Time already for the autumn ball.” Colin laughed, shaking his head and looking away casually. “I suppose that Mister Dunn will be in attendance, won’t he? Assuming his courtship of Miss Hann is proceeding apace?”

The change that came over Sir James’ face at this new topic was dramatic. Though he was by no means a cheery man, the air of distaste, even resentment that spilled forth into the air was undeniable. “Diana,” said Sir James as though it were a curse. He set down his glass of wine and turned to the mound of papers on his desk. “Yes, yes, that all will continue as planned.”

Colin ran a finger along the rim of his glass to keep himself from shaking. “I, ah ... I hope Mister Dunn will indeed be a suitable match for Diana, then. I understand his family’s business has not always been the most stable venture.”

“I’m sure he will prove sufficient,” snapped Sir James without looking up from his letters. His tone indicated there was to be no more on the subject, and to his shame, Colin found himself swallowing the rest of his line of enquiry.

It’s for the best, he thought glumly. What were you going to say anyway, you ninny? ‘By the by, Sir James, did you really murder your sister and steal her fortune?’ Let this be over—it’s the best for all of us.

But that did not prove to be the end of the matter after all, as Colin realised the low noise ringing in his ear was the sound of Sir James grumbling something to himself under his breath. Straightening as subtly as he could manage, Colin cocked his ear in his stepfather’s

direction, straining to hear what was being said. “Good enough for the likes of her, at least. Won’t be much longer now, and thank God for that,” were the only words Colin could discern.

“Not that there’s any rush for such a thing, of course.”

Sir James’ head snapped in Colin’s direction, his eyes aflame with the wary look of a caged beast. Colin realised with a sinking feeling in his chest that those words had come from his lips.

Though he had learned years ago that it was a dangerous thing to provoke his stepfather after a conversation was closed, Sir James merely stared at Colin for a moment or two before leaning back in his chair, moustache twitching. “I suppose there’s no sense keeping this from you. You’ll need to begin thinking of such matters for yourself before long, after all.” He extended his empty glass in Colin’s direction.

“Yes, sir,” Colin answered as he refilled the vessel.

Sir James loosed a weary sigh and ran one hand through his thinning steel-grey hair. “I confess, that girl vexes me as no one in the world. I have never known a more contentious, irritating person in my life. I cannot for the life of me understand how anyone can put up with that little harpy. You seem to get on with her well enough, somehow.”

Colin only just managed to avoid spilling the bottle of wine onto the floor at this. “I ... yes, sir,” he squeaked.

His stepfather continued, apparently not noticing Colin’s reaction.

“But those are personal matters, and personal matters need to be cut out of business entirely. I should hope I’ve taught you that by now.”

“Y ... yes, sir.” *Where on Earth is he going with this?*

“The truth of the thing is that, even if she may be family, a young woman is an expensive beast to keep, and Diana is more dear to keep than anyone else I have known. Apart from the obvious costs of feeding and housing the girl, there are all her legal affairs and the various frivolities that she is forever squandering her money upon. Jewels, the newest fashions from France, all that rot. You understand.”

Now Colin could not even nod along emptily to his stepfather’s words. His eyes narrowed, muscles tensing. *How is Diana supposed to have spent her money on such things when she never is allowed to leave the house? Had she been buying new dresses and such, she would have mentioned it to me by now, else I would have seen some sign of it myself.*

Sir James sighed, leaning forward and striking a posture that suggested he was the most wretched, put-upon man in Britain. “Women have no head for money, I’m afraid. You’ll learn that lesson yourself one day. I have no doubt. But unfortunately, due to the terms of my sister’s will, I’ve been kept from fully taking control of Diana’s financial affairs, which has made it difficult to keep her from destitution long enough to find a husband who will take care of her. And that’s also why this issue is of some import; the longer she stays unmarried, the more of her inheritance is spent keeping her in her lavish lifestyle. If Mister Dunn won’t have her before long, she will hardly be left with anything to her name to serve as a dowry!”

Whatever Colin had swallowed was now curdling into a cold lump of poison in his innards. “You mean all her family’s money is nearly gone?” he asked blankly.

This earned a scornful sideways glance from Sir James. “No, no, nothing quite that bad,” he blustered, eyes darting about the room. “But you understand, once she is married, I will be able to take a more active hand in managing her funds. To preserve something for her children someday, you understand. If there is anything left by then, that is.”

I can scarcely believe what I am hearing, he thought, struggling to draw breath. It's frankly impossible that Diana has spent anything at all of her parents' money; as she tells it, Sir James has not even let her know how much money she has inherited or where it is kept.

Colin forced a merry, carefree laugh that seemed to reassure his stepfather. “A most droll situation. Though, er, a difficult one for you, sir.” He licked his lips, hoping to quell the sick feeling that still burbled in his stomach. “And I’m certain you have the right of things. Though he is hardly a storybook prince, Mister Dunn will make Diana very happy, without a doubt.”

The words scarcely seemed to register with Sir James, who stared at Colin with a steeliness that felt almost diabolical. “Bah!” he blurted, waving a hand dismissively and startling Colin nearly out of his seat. “‘Make her happy.’ Bah! More womanly silliness. This is business, my boy, nothing more. I thought I’d not done so poor a job in teaching you that you would forget that already. Dunn will have her, and soon, so I can, at last, make proper use of my inheritance.”

These final two words sent a chill through Colin that rendered him speechless, turned to stone by the wickedness he had just glimpsed. He stared dumbly at Sir James, seeing not the great man who had saved his mother but a mephitic troll, a dragon tenting its claws in anticipation of accumulating another golden bauble.

Years of derision and abuse flashed through Colin's mind at once, but with the parts recast and the sets menacing and distorted. He no longer saw a steadfast guardian struggling to bring order to a troubled boy and his sickly mother but a grasping villain taking out his own frustrations on those smaller than him.

The troll turned away from its work to look at him, its eyes beady and black. "I addressed you, Colin. You have not forgotten *everything* I taught you, I trust?"

"Oh! Y ... no, sir," Colin said, then attempted a weak laugh to excuse his lapse in manners.

Sir James was already waving him away as he returned to his work and his muttering. "... Bloody wasting my time all these years. Not as though I've been teaching him for my own damned health, doesn't he know that?"

Something foul tumbled and swirled in Colin's stomach, and he felt himself sway unsteadily as he staggered out the study door and away down the corridor.

The man does not even make the pretence of caring for Diana's happiness or the things to which she is entitled. He only cares about himself. How have I deluded myself otherwise for so long?

Colin blinked, regarding the massive portrait of his stepfather hanging from the wall. *Sir James is a ruthless man. I have always known as much. In fact, I have admired it ... and that admiration has blinded me to what that ruthlessness may have made him capable of.*

He did not mention a thing about murder, though, Colin reasoned to himself. However, this was the only point he could count in his stepfather's favour as he left the portrait, feeling its eyes follow him down the corridor. And as loud as his stepfather's voice was in his ears, with criticisms real and imagined, there was another, louder voice that drowned this out. It spoke only of what must be done next if Colin was to have any hope of saving his own soul—only God could save Sir James Leeson.

* * *

The sight of the door to Diana's room had once made Colin's knees tremble with pleasant anticipation. Now, standing before that cold and aged wood, he felt like the basest worm on God's earth. He lingered there for a long while, and as every inch of his resolve was occupied in keeping him from fleeing back to his own room, he found he had none remaining to actually knock on her door.

Just knock, for God's sake, Colin snapped at himself, impatient with his own cowardice. *Whatever else he may be, Sir James is right about many things. And if I have any pretensions of being a man and not a worm, it's time for me to begin acting like it.*

Colin licked his lips, glanced down the corridor to see if he was being watched, then softly brought his knuckles against the door. There was no answer.

Concerned, he knocked again, ever so slightly louder. This time he drew out a quiet response:

“Go away, Mister Mullens.”

“I must speak with you,” he whispered, his face nearly pressed against the rough grain of the oak.

Again he gained no reply. Not a creak of a distant bed, not footsteps approaching the door. Colin glanced around him nervously, certain someone would discover this illicit visit. Even a hate-filled invective from Diana would have been welcome at this point.

Desperately, he hissed at the door, “Damn it, Diana, there are ears in this house that must not hear what I have to say.”

“If you’re looking for a willing ear, there are none in this room.” Her voice was almost as soft as his and closer than before. Colin looked down and saw a dim shadow stretching out under the doorway towards him. He put his hand against the wood, and for a single heartbeat found himself comforted that no matter the malice she quite reasonably bore him, the woman he loved was so close to him after an eternal morning and afternoon apart.

“I don’t blame you for being angry with me,” Colin said, his head dipping with shame. “I am not asking for your forgiveness, as I am not deserving of such.” His forehead now sagging forward against the door, he breathed out in despair as he squeezed out the words. “For your own safety, though, I beg of you, *please*—”

There was a *click*, and Colin saw the door swing open before him. He entered quickly, seeing that Diana was retreating into her room, and closed it behind him as quietly as possible. She took a seat on her sofa by the window, her golden hair catching the radiance of the afternoon sun in her curls, and Colin was so momentarily overwhelmed by the

sight that he completely forgot why he had been invited in.

But then he saw the look of bitter scepticism on her face. Arms folded, Diana regarded him warily, her chin set in defiance. "Say what you have to say, sir," she said, biting off the words between her teeth.

Colin struggled to force his heart to beat, his lungs to draw breath. Those pale blue eyes obliterated every thought in his head, and he scrambled to invent the proper words.

"I ..." he began, then stopped. What was he doing? The room swirled about him; everything that had been certain in his life had now come unmoored.

Useless. Traitor. Disloyal. Ungrateful.

Colin blinked, recognising for good and all that the voice that had been speaking these calumnies in his mind was identical to his stepfather's. He shook his head angrily, and even as Diana looked on with puzzlement, he drew in a long, deep breath before reaching out to take her hands. She recoiled at first, but Colin held fast, looking into her eyes with a sudden intensity. He sputtered, sure this conviction would fly away before long.

"I still do not think Sir James is capable of what you describe," Colin said in one hasty breath. "But between what you overheard and what he has intimated to me, I concur that this affair requires further investigation. Right or wrong, the question demands an answer right away. I would have realised this much sooner if I had not been so damnably pig-headed."

Diana sniffed away a tear, though a smile parted her beautiful rosy lips. "And closed-minded," she added. "And arrogant, and—"

Colin hung his head and laughed with her, feeling the tears come to his own eyes in kind. "There will be time enough later to abuse me properly. Right now, we have more pressing matters to discuss."

And that was just what the two of them did, as the afternoon began to grow late and the yellow sun was dimmed to burnished gold. Heedless of the sounds of household activity that clamoured down the hallway as the staff prepared for the famed Leeson autumn ball to happen that evening, Colin and Diana conjured a flicker of an idea that eventually caught the wind and grew into a shaky flame of a plan. By five o'clock, it was as ready as it would ever be, Colin declared, and at any rate, they were out of time if they were to put it into motion.

"Are you certain this will work?" Diana asked nervously, her fingers tugging at a loose thread at the edge of the sofa's upholstery.

Colin shook his head with a reflexively wry smile, one that he swept from his face when he saw the deadly seriousness in her eyes. "Not as certain as I would like to be," he said quietly. "If your Mister Arnold is not in attendance tonight, we will have to form another plan. And even if he is as kindly and well disposed towards you as you say, it could be that he will have no more desire to participate in this investigation than I had myself."

Her eyes shimmered in the golden glow of the afternoon sun, and Colin felt himself crushed by a desire to hold her, to reassure her. Instead, he reached out and placed his hand atop hers. His voice grave, Colin spoke, "But whatever may come, Diana, we will find the truth, whatever it may be. I am not a man for oaths, but I swear to you, you will have me as your ally, no matter how terrible a truth we

uncover.”

Tears scattered onto the carpet as the two embraced—Colin could no more be sure whether they were Diana’s or his own than he knew where her body ended and his began. All he knew was that their parting was finished, and as long as his body drew breath, he would not let her down ever again.

Chapter 21

The Truth Outs

The little library on the ground floor of the Leeson house was as nice and cosy a place as Diana had found inside the halls of the hated edifice. Yet as Colin closed and locked the door, shutting Diana, Jerome Arnold, and himself away from the rest of the goings-on at the Leeson autumn ball, she could not ignore the spectre of conspiracy that hung heavy in the still, dusty air of the little room.

This pall wore more heavily still on Jerome Arnold, who leaned forward and covered his mouth with his bony hands, still taking in the story Diana had breathlessly finished several minutes before. Dressed in his finest suit and carefully groomed for the occasion, Mister Arnold was the picture of avuncular care; Diana felt a pang of guilt at so distressing the kindly man, but at this point, it seemed unavoidable. He paid no mind to Colin, who took a seat close to the other two occupants, but at last, leaned back and sighed heavily.

“That ... that is a most troubling accusation, Diana. Murdering one’s one sister, stealing his niece’s inheritance ...” Mister Arnold shuddered, the thought left incomplete. He looked over at Colin for the first time, peering at him suspiciously over his spectacles. “You are certain we may speak freely?”

Diana looked over at Colin, seeking any sign of unease or uncertainty in him. Instead, she could not help smiling as he met her gaze with his glittering green eyes. “I would stake my life on it,” she said, as much to herself as to Mister Arnold. “I *am* staking my life on it.”

“Rest assured, sir,” Colin put in, “if my stepfather is indeed culpable of

what Diana and I suspect, I wish for justice to be done.” A strange, pensive look crossed his face as though finally considering the implications of this for his stepfather. For an instant, Diana found herself wondering if she could truly trust Colin at his word.

“Whatever the truth of the thing may be,” said Mister Arnold wearily, pulling Diana’s attention back to his angular features, “it means nothing if we do not have any proof. Even if you testified to what you overheard, Sir James would deny it, and this man Bertrand would do the same if he could even be compelled to appear at court.”

“I’ve looked through his letters,” Diana said, frowning. “I found nothing suspect anywhere at all. Nothing that I could understand as being related to me or my parents, at least.”

Jerome Arnold rubbed his wizened hands together. “That is odd. He would certainly keep some documents pertaining to your inheritance. I know he has them because I delivered them myself.”

“Have you looked in his safe?” asked Colin brightly.

Diana felt her mouth curl into an “o” of surprise, one that drew warm laughter from Colin Mullens. “I thought you might not have. You are clearly a sleuth of some considerable talent, Diana, but talent only gets you so far without a key.”

Mister Arnold gave the pair a curious look, and for a moment, Diana worried he might have drawn a drastic conclusion about the nature of Diana’s relationship with Colin. But then his lips curled in a warm smile, and he leaned back in his chair again. “I think it a safe wager that Sir James will be suitably occupied this evening. Mister Mullens, if you can produce this key in short order, we can ask our sleuth to see

if she can find anything sufficiently truthful in Sir James' safe."

"Tonight?" Diana asked, feeling her heart pound in anticipation.

"Right now, unless you had your heart set on joining in the dancing. When you have finished, bring whatever you find back here so we can decide on our next move."

Her mind raced with worries. Suddenly it felt as though danger lurked around every corner. "Won't we be missed? If Uncle James realises we are absent, he may grow suspicious, and ..."

Colin shook his head. "The autumnal ball is a perennial mess, especially for my father. This year it seems to have slipped his attention, and with as many carriages as I've seen arriving over the last half-hour alone, his under-preparedness will keep him occupied at least until dinner is served."

"And I will accept whatever tortures Missus Arnold has ready for me in return for leaving her to fend off the Westermonts alone," Jerome added with a rueful smile.

Diana looked back and forth between Colin and Mister Arnold. Her knees shook beneath her, and she found she had bitten her lip so hard it was beginning to draw blood. *I've prayed for something to deliver me from Uncle James for so, so long. Yet now, the moment of my deliverance has arrived, and I feel as though I am merely dreaming. Do I really have the fortitude to go through with this plot?*

She straightened in surprise at the feeling of a hand on her shoulder,

then felt reassurance wash over her as she looked up to see Colin smiling down at her. Suddenly there was little doubt in her mind that everything would be all right, somehow.

“Miss Diana,” coughed Mister Arnold uncomfortably. “I can only imagine what you have been subjected to in this house. You don’t know how it pained us, Victoria and myself, to leave you here with your uncle. But God willing, you will not have anything to worry about before long.”

Jerome took off his spectacles irritably, rubbing a bleary eye and looking at Diana tearfully. “You really are the picture of your mother, you know,” he said in a voice filled with wonder. “She was the strongest, bravest woman I have ever had the privilege of knowing. If you possess even half of her intelligence and fortitude, I have no doubt you will succeed in finding the truth.”

“And you are not alone,” said Colin softly. “I will keep watch over the door, just in case.”

Diana put her hand atop his, feeling the warmth of his skin as she closed her eyes and took a breath. Then she stood, nodded to Mister Arnold, and strode purposefully out the door.

* * *

The journey to her uncle’s study was a treacherous one. The little library was on the other side of the house from Sir James’ study, meaning they would need to pass through the central atrium of the house. Colin led them up a servants’ staircase to the first storey, suggesting they would attract less attention and be less likely to run into Sir James there, even if that would bring them near the ballroom.

Diana was dressed in an appropriately festive if slightly too-small gown of green silk, and while the garment was successful in looking reasonably fashionable, it also slowed her pace considerably.

“I’m sorry, I’m moving as quickly as I can.”

“I can’t say I mind the delay,” said Colin in an impish voice, trailing behind her. When Diana turned back to look at him in surprise, she saw his gaze was fixed on the curve of her derriere, an expression of appreciation plain on his face. “No matter how dire the circumstances, only a blind fool would complain of a sight so lovely.”

A curious look crossed Colin’s features, and she could see his fingers clench into a fist as though stopping himself from reaching out and cupping her bottom lustily. Diana turned away again, hoping she would not lose herself in a blushing fit. *Would that there was time for such things* ... she thought sadly, trying to restrain the desire she felt welling up within herself and focus on the task at hand.

More than once on their progress, they had to duck into a corner or an open doorway when Colin sighted the face of a partygoer who would recognise them and delay their progress. And this was hardly the only impediment to their progress; half-hidden behind Lady Westermont, Diana caught sight of Gerard Dunn peering over the heads of the other partygoers, and she doubled her pace down the corridor, praying he had not seen her.

Just as they’d thought they’d escaped back into anonymity, four words split the air and stopped them in their tracks.

“Diana, there you are!”

Diana froze, her eyes wide with fear, and when Leah Reid placed her hands on her friend in greeting, she nearly cried out in terror.

“Diana, whatever is the matter?” Leah asked in concern. She glanced around them conspiratorially. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Don’t tell anyone, but Mother and I weren’t exactly invited to the ball. I just knew that you would hate this affair, and I couldn’t stand by and let you—”

Leah stopped mid-sentence as Diana took her hands and leaned in close, whispering over the thundering of her heart in her chest. “You trust me, don’t you, friend?” Diana asked softly.

The other girl nodded, her face suddenly serious.

“Then please, for my sake—walk away. If anyone asks if you’ve seen me, tell them I’m out in the garden or in my room. *Anything*,” Diana pleaded. “I swear to you that I’ll tell you all as soon as I’m able.”

Leah nodded again, a look of concentration on her pretty features. Diana turned away, following a worried-looking Colin, and heard her friend making animated conversation with someone else, loud enough that she drew the eye of every nearby reveller.

How lucky I truly am to have friends such as Leah, thought Diana.

At last, they crossed into the other wing of the strange house; the humble door to the servants’ stairway was in sight at the end of the

corridor.

“Wait!” Diana hissed, grabbing Colin by the sleeve of his coat. She pulled the two of them into a darkened doorway, unsure whether she wanted to peek out at the dirty face she had just seen or to hide her face and pray he had not sighted her.

“What is it?” Colin asked quietly. He was standing close to her, close enough that she could feel his breath on her ear.

Trying to force her heartbeat to quieten, she pointed. Though the man was wearing a black gentleman’s coat of recent vintage, his greasy hair and unshaven chin made him easily visible “Over there—it’s that man, Bertrand. The man who ...”

She fell silent as Bertrand turned in their direction. He was standing at the edge of a cluster of noblemen and women in their finery, guzzling a glass of wine and looking admiringly at the furniture surrounding him in the first-storey atrium. He seemed not to notice Diana, however, and soon wheeled in the other direction in pursuit of a gaggle of tittering young ladies.

“I’ve seen him come and go from time to time,” Colin said, a hard edge coming into his voice. “He was always escorted to my father’s study, then left shortly thereafter. I never thought to stop him, to enquire about what business he might be on ...”

Diana glanced at a nearby clock. *Almost seven-thirty*, she thought, her pulse racing. “Never mind that now, Colin. You couldn’t have known.”

But Colin's eyes were locked on the receding form of Bertrand; his jaw clenched tightly. "Sir James would not invite him here tonight. Even if all our suspicions are true, he would not attract suspicion by having his relationship with the man made generally known."

"We have to hurry," Diana protested, pulling his arm.

"The bastard, I'll not let him leave here if he's done even a tenth of what you say ..." Colin growled, stepping out from the shadows and beginning to roll up his sleeve.

"Colin, *please!*"

He looked down at her, and Diana could see all the anger in his face melt into concern. Colin stepped closer and wiped away a tear from her face with his finger.

"I'm sorry, Diana. You're right, of course." He cast his gaze back at Bertrand, teeth bared. "But his time will come before long, I swear it." And with that, they were on their way to the staircase and their goal.

At long last, they reached the study. Just as they approached the closed door and found it unlocked, Diana winced at a sudden thought. "The key to the safe! Damn it; I didn't—"

She was abruptly silenced by the sight of a small brass key entering her field of vision, dangling from a threadbare blue ribbon held neatly between Colin's fingers. The man flashed his most winning smile, his teeth dazzling white, eyes dancing with laughter. "Fortunately, at least one of us has—"

Colin's gloating was brought to a quick conclusion by Diana wrapping her arms around his neck and bringing her lips against his in a ferocious kiss. They breathed as one, their mouths tingling as they scrambled for purchase. Colin's hands found the small of Diana's back, and for one perfect second, all of Sir James Leeson's scheming and treachery and murderous minions dissolved into nothingness.

Yet, for all its perfection, that glorious second tragically needed to end. Their lips parted, Diana's heart crying out as they pulled back from one another. "Thank you, Colin," she said softly, and the warm, innocent smile that lingered on his lips was almost enough to make her forget all else and lose herself there for the rest of her days.

"Hurry," Colin said, nodding reluctantly to the door. "I'll stay out here and call out if anyone approaches."

The study was shrouded in sinister orange light from the fire that was kept burning in the study's fireplace. Fearing the slightest sound or sight would spoil everything, Diana crept towards Uncle James' desk without lighting a candle, fumbling half-blind across the room.

The key clicked true in the little black safe, and its door swung open to reveal dozens of papers and pouches. Wordlessly Diana pored over the contents. At the top of the pile, she found documents pertaining to her inheritance, and she could not help gasping as she read the astronomical sum she had to her name.

All the fruits of Father's work ... this is more than enough for me to live on for ten lifetimes. Her fingers clenched, wrinkling the paper. *Enough for Uncle James to kill for.*

A nearby sound reached her ear, sending a silent shudder through her bones. Through the half-closed study door, she could hear Colin speaking with a servant. She could scarcely understand what he was saying, but it seemed he was feigning drunkenness and trying to send them away. *Have to hurry*, Diana thought, setting the will aside.

The conversation fell back into silence after several long, painful moments of searching. Diana grew increasingly discouraged, her hope of salvation beginning to slip through her fingers.

There! she thought, seizing on an envelope addressed to James Leeson. She ran her fingers over the lettering, recognising her mother's handwriting.

Eagerly she stood and paced towards the fireplace. The dancing orange light revealed the contents of a single page, one that looked as if it had been crumpled into a ball before being carefully replaced in its envelope. Diana's eyes raced across the page:

'To my dearest brother: I confess, I was saddened if not surprised by your most recent letter. I understand you are facing still more financial difficulties, and you have my wholehearted sympathy. But I'm sorry to tell you that that is all you will receive from me. Not due to the hurtful words you used in your letter, but due to the bitter facts of this situation.

'William and I have been as generous as we possibly can, and by his reckoning, have given you thousands of pounds to help with your many monetary problems over the last several years. If you can stomach some sisterly advice (poor medicine for any problem, I confess), it would be this: more money will not solve your problems, James. However much money you can bring in from your business, it will not continue to maintain that awful, ostentatious house, nor sustain your poor investments and the

constant, impulsive gifts to your friends and peers. The time has come to do as a man must and change your lifestyle according to your situation.

‘I wish things had been different, James. But through your own decisions you have brought hardship upon yourself—I ask that you do not visit the same upon your sister, your brother-in-law, and your niece. I look forward to speaking with you and helping in whatever other way I can.

‘Your Adoring Sister, Catherine.’

There was nothing Diana could do to stem the tide of tears that washed over her now and watered the paper in her hand. Forcing back a sob with a hand over her mouth, Diana rushed to the door and Colin, forgetting to close the safe as she left.

“Here,” she choked out, beckoning for Colin to follow her into the little staircase that led down towards her room. He complied, and they closed the door behind them just as Diana thought she might fall away into a faint.

Poised at the top of the stairs, every sound sending a bolt of lightning into her veins, Diana felt herself wilt away like a leaf in the rain. Colin’s strong arms once again reached out and kept her aloft in their steely grip. Looking up at him, she saw pure, undisguised concern shine down at her from his emerald eyes—the laughing mask that had been ever kept between them was now utterly gone.

“Whatever you found, Diana, and whatever becomes of all of us ...” said Colin in an otherworldly voice, the words seeming to flow freely from his soul. “Know that I love you more than life itself.”

There, atop the narrow staircase, they kissed once more. Desperate to delay the heartbreak that she knew would come when he read the words in the letter, Diana clutched his hair between her fingers, tears still running freely down her cheeks.

Then she could delay no more. Weakly, she passed the letter to Colin, who read it in the dim autumn starlight that came in through the narrow window of the stairwell. Her heart hammered like thunder—or was that his heartbeat she felt?

“This is ...” Colin put a hand on Diana’s shoulder, and she felt a thrill of excitement run through her frame at the contact. But this sensation turned cold and comfortless when she glimpsed the sadness behind his mask of stoicism.

“We have to tell Mister Arnold,” he said softly. “And now.”

“What will we do then?” Diana asked weakly, hanging onto Colin as tight as she dared. “What *can* we do?”

“Leave that to me.”

* * *

“Bloody hell, Colin, what the devil’s the matter with you?” roared Sir James Leeson as he stomped into his study. “Don’t you know dinner’s about to be served? Are you expecting all our guests to go hungry while you invite me for idle chatter?” He looked around the darkened room, seemingly not seeing Colin, though his stepson was seated

nearly right in front of him.

“Not so idle, sir,” said Colin, earning a startled jump from his stepfather. He gestured to a nearby empty chair. “Will you sit with me a moment?”

Sir James shook his head wrathfully. “I’ll have none of your nonsense tonight, Colin. Davenport tells me you’re drunk. If this is your idea of a joke, you and that Adam Radcliffe, I’ll thrash you within an inch of your life!”

Colin grimaced. *I’d hoped this would not be so difficult, somehow.* “This is important, sir. I ask you again if you won’t sit so we can—”

“Hang whatever you call important, boy. That dullard Gerard Dunn is in attendance and is anxiously waiting for my return. We’re to announce Diana’s engagement to him after dinner. So get off your arse and come down here so we can—”

“Is there anything you can tell me about this?” Colin held aloft the folded-up Hann will and the envelope with the letter from Diana’s mother.

The man looked at him, uncomprehending, before he drew his shoulders tall, puffing out his chest in outrage. “You’ve been going through my safe, then, have you? You devious little devil, I ...” Sir James stopped then as if stricken by an idea. “What the hell do those have to do with anything, anyway?”

Colin folded his hands in his lap and looked down sorrowfully. “Sir

..." he began, then stopped with a sniff. "Father, why didn't you tell me we were having problems with money? Were things really so bad that you had to ask your brother-in-law for so much?"

Sir James' eyes jumped from the papers to the burning hearth. He stepped forward, reaching out a hand to snatch away the papers, but Colin stood in one fluid movement, holding them away from him even as he put out another hand to stop his stepfather from coming any closer.

"The house isn't everything. We could have lived somewhere else if we needed to," Colin protested, his eyes growing hot.

James snarled, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Then explain it to me, for God's sake!" Colin felt a sting of shame as a single tear ran down his cheek, but he pushed this aside. "Just tell me what happened, and we will deal with it accordingly. Whatever's happened, Father, I'm sure that—"

"Don't you dare call me that, you viper," snapped Sir James, holding himself as tall as he could. "I'm no father of yours; if I were, perhaps you wouldn't have turned out such a miserable drunken wretch."

One thick arm was propped against the back of an armchair; Colin found himself wondering if the man intended to throw the chair at him. He extended the other towards Colin. "I won't ask you again, boy. Give me what's mine."

Colin took in the sight before him for a long, tense moment ... then

stuffed the will and the envelope alike into the breast pocket of his jacket. “Not until you tell me exactly what happened to William and Catherine Hann.”

He swallowed a mouthful of sawdust, expecting Sir James to either lunge at him or to loose another volley of abuse. Instead, the man took a step back and laughed bitterly, bemusement twinkling in his eye. “Very well. Since you’re so desperate to hear the truth of things. For all your faults, lad, perhaps you’re finally ready to hear the reality of this world.”

Colin folded his arms and studied his stepfather carefully.

The flames in the hearth danced and leapt in Sir James’ eyes, his hair standing askew as the shadows played along the walls of the study. “The hand of fate is not wise, my boy—it’s stupid. Terribly stupid, and cruel besides. Rich rewards are handed out to the unworthy. Whole kingdoms are given to madmen if you have been too blind to notice. Meanwhile, the truly good and deserving are given only bitter punishment.”

“Meaning yourself, of course,” Colin said through gritted teeth.

Sir James nodded. “Those with true ambition and the intelligence to shape the world for the better—they are the truly great men of the world. Yet they are deprived of what they are owed, what the world would be better for their having.”

“Your sister’s money.”

Sir James recoiled, his face curdling in disgust. “My sister ... bah! She spreads her legs for a low-born simpleton, and then fortune showers his business with riches while the fruits of my labours wither on the vine. She is given a life of luxury, and I can barely afford to keep my lazy, idle household staff.”

Colin blinked, uncomprehending. “Were things truly that dire, F—Sir James?”

His stepfather barked with humourless laughter. “Between my business partners robbing me blind and my generosity to every pleading hand that is shoved my way? It’s a crime, Colin. A *disgrace*. When I think of all I could do with that money, all the good I could have done in the world ... but that selfish bitch of a sister kept it all to herself and her own wretched family.”

“It was her inheritance. Her money and her husband’s, not yours,” Colin put in numbly. “The fortune your brother-in-law built with a lifetime of hard work, and they left it to Diana.”

The man’s nose wrinkled, repulsed. “I’ve taught you what a man does, Colin—at least, I have tried to do so and prayed my efforts have not been wasted on unworthy clay. Now it’s time you learn the most important lesson of all: a man does a great many things, but a *great* man is not held to the same inferior standard. Most of all, he does not bow to the whims of an unjust world.”

Sir James’ eyes were wild, his lip twisted in an imperious sneer. “No, he corrects the errors that he comes across. He seeks out the injustices on this Earth, the mistakes dealt by fate’s hand, and he makes them right. *That* is what a great man does; it is what you will do yourself, someday, when you are called to do so.”

In one fell swoop, the room stopped its mad spin about Colin's head. Suddenly everything was clear as day, from the pathetic figure he saw capering in the firelight to the very future itself. Two paths lay before him, and though his heart broke to see that neither led to Diana, only one of them led away from the flames, and that paved with tragedy.

But it is what a man must do, spoke the voice in Colin's soul.

"It's true, then," said Colin in a loud, clear voice. He drew himself tall with his chin set in determination. "You arranged your sister and brother-in-law's carriage wreck. You killed them."

His stepfather regarded Colin as though he were a bit of mud soiling his boot. "You really are a naïve child, aren't you?" asked Sir James with revulsion. "I suppose it's my fault for being too kind, too lax with your upbringing. It's your mother's influence that's kept you so soft and ignorant of the true workings of the world. Pathetic."

Colin stepped towards his stepfather, his fists clenching at his sides. "Say it," he said in a voice dripping with menace. "I want to hear you say you did it."

"I only wish I had done what needed to be done sooner, so I would not have been too distracted to give you the proper upbringing you needed," Sir James said thoughtfully, heedless of how close Colin had come to him. A wicked twinkle came to his eye. "I might well have thought to do the same to their mewling brat, Diana. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble."

"Say you killed them!"

Sir James threw out a fist, pushing Colin back a step, then laughed.
“Of *course* I bloody killed them!”

Chapter 22

Justice and Mercy

“Murderer!”

The door flew open, and Colin was momentarily blinded as the doorway was filled by the shadowy form of a person holding a candelabrum. He blinked, rubbing away the shining green after-images from his eyes, and saw it was Diana, tears streaming from her eyes and closely followed by Jerome Arnold.

“What the hell is this?” roared Sir James, drawing himself up to his full height. “Leave us this instant! I am having a private conversation with my stepson.”

“I heard every word,” said Diana, fists shaking as they clenched at her sides.

Jerome Arnold nodded. “As did I.” Though he was but a slim, spindly man of middle age, he folded his arms in what was likely the most imposing posture he could manage.

Sir James sneered. “Colin, please see our guest to the door. He is no longer welcome here at this evening’s festivities. Miss Hann can be escorted back to her room, where she will collect herself until such time as I am ready to speak with her.”

Colin folded his arms, chin raised defiantly. His stepfather received

this like a physical blow, and Colin could see the man stagger backward in a daze. “I see. So, you’ve all betrayed me, then.”

“Us?” Diana barked, stepping closer to Sir James in an outraged posture. “After you confess to murdering your own family, to stealing from your ward, you *dare* accuse anyone else of disloyalty?”

His moustache twitching erratically, Sir James’ eyes jumped from Jerome to Diana and back again. “I ... I don’t know ...” he stammered. Colin could see that the man’s knees were shaking, his balance clearly unsteady.

“Sir, perhaps you should sit down for a moment,” Colin said gently, reaching out for his stepfather’s shoulder to guide him to a chair.

The older man lashed out with a fist, nearly connecting with Colin right in his jaw. “Unhand me, traitor! Don’t you lay a hand on me, or so help me, I’ll ...”

“Sir James,” said Jerome Arnold in a quiet yet firm voice, all eyes turning to the old bookkeeper. “There is no need for violence this evening. None of us wish for blood to be shed, especially among family.”

Diana snarled, “No *more* blood, you mean, you—” But she was silenced by a gentle raise of Jerome’s hand.

“Whatever follows is in the hands of God and the King’s justice,” Jerome continued, his steady voice seeming to have a pacifying effect on the aggravated gentleman. “You should know that I’ve sent for the

authorities, and I expect armed representatives of the law will be arriving shortly. When that occurs, I will do my best to ensure you are escorted away as discreetly as possible, to maintain your dignity and preserve the safety of all—”

“No!” blurted Sir James, recoiling from the man’s words as a cat scalded by boiling water. He backed up until he was pressed against the far wall, hands held up in a desperate attempt to defend himself. “No, no, no! Judas! Betrayers, all of you!”

Colin eyed him warily, watching Sir James’ eyes search the room for anything that could be used as a weapon. Before he could say anything, he saw Diana step closer, a look of vicious judgement flashing in her eyes. She opened her mouth to loose another accusation at her villainous guardian, but before any sound could issue forth, the man reached out to something on his desk and charged at her.

“Diana, look out!” Colin shouted, rushing forward and pushing her out of the way with his shoulder. Even as she landed roughly on the floor, he saw something glitter in his stepfather’s hand, which lashed out towards his face.

Someone screamed just as Colin caught Sir James’ hand, stopping a wicked-looking letter opener just before it could plunge into Colin’s heart. The older man moved faster than Colin had expected, and even as he held the dagger away from its mark, Sir James brought up a fist into his stepson’s chin.

Colin grunted and staggered backward, dazed. Trying to recover his bearings, his eyes fell upon a shape moving towards the prone form of Diana sprawled on the floor, and before he knew what he was doing, Colin swung out his foot. It connected with something hard, and there was a sickening thump as Sir James fell headlong onto the floor.

In a flash, he was upon Sir James, protectiveness of Diana filling his limbs with the strength of ten men. Sir James fought like a madman, his limbs lashing out savagely, but Colin held him fast, pinning his arms and legs to the ground with his own body weight and holding his stepfather by the collar there on the floor. Jerome and Diana stood by, paralyzed by this violent display.

“You wretched dog,” Sir James spat, his mouth red with blood. Hate roiled in his eyes as he looked up at Colin. “I ought to have let you and your bitch of a mother die in the streets. To think I wasted my precious time and money trying to teach a cur like you how a man is supposed to act.”

Colin’s breath came fast and heavy, and he felt his fists shaking even as he held his stepfather firmly in his grasp. He was overcome with a powerful desire to smash the man’s head against his desk or to pummel him until his evil words were stopped ... but in three heartbeats’ time, he instead let the man drop against the floor, where he lolled helplessly with his head half-propped against the foot of his desk.

“You taught me better than you know, sir,” Colin said, wiping away a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth.

Grunting with pain, Sir James sat up with his back against his desk. He dabbed a sore place on the back of his head and recoiled at the blood he found staining his fingers, then cast a malignant look at Diana, who had climbed back to her feet.

“I suppose you’re happy now, aren’t you?” Sir James snarled. “Now that you’ve turned everyone against me somehow, you mean to take

everything I've worked for, all for—”

“Uncle James, it's time for you to stop talking,” Diana snapped, a regal tone in her voice that Colin had never heard before. To his surprise, he saw that these few brief words silenced Sir James immediately, and the older man's eyes were wide with fear.

“*James!*” Colin turned to see his mother, Priscilla, entering the room with her hands wringing a silk handkerchief in consternation. She stood in the doorway, her eyes fluttering in confusion, as she took in the scene of chaos in her husband's study. “My God, what's happened?”

Jerome Arnold stepped forward as he straightened his tie. “Missus Leeson, I'm afraid there's something you should know. If you'd like to step outside here, I'd be glad to explain everything ...”

“No.” Colin's voice was firm, his posture tall, though he felt himself crumbling inside. He approached his mother and offered her his hand, guiding her to an empty chair by the fireside even as Sir James looked on with hatred in his eyes. Priscilla allowed herself to be helped into a seat, though she seemed on the verge of tears.

“Mother,” Colin said softly. “We've ... just discovered that Sir James has done something terrible.” He drew in a long breath, closing his eyes as he searched his mind for how to give voice to the unspeakable. “Mother, Sir James had Diana's parents killed. He arranged their carriage wreck and has been stealing Diana's inheritance ever since she was brought here.”

“What?” Priscilla asked in a barely audible voice. She struggled to draw breath, looking at her husband with fearful eyes. “I ... no,

James. No, it's not true. It can't be. It's not possible; you would never do such a ... Tell me it's not true, James, that you didn't ..."

Sir James took a breath that became a pained hiss, and he turned himself away from his wife's eyes as he grumbled something incoherent under his breath.

An agonised, inhuman moan issued forth from Priscilla's throat. She pitched forward in her seat, and Colin reached out to catch her before she collapsed onto the floor. But just as quickly as this spirit had come upon her, she seemed to fade into a cold numbness. Her face transmuted into a stiff, placid mask, though tears still rolled down her reddened cheeks.

"It was the night of that terrible storm this past April, wasn't it?" Priscilla asked blankly. "That was what you were talking about with that awful Bertrand fellow, why you and he spoke so late into the night. I knew you were involved in something for the worse, James, but your own *sister*?"

Still, Sir James refused to speak. Even as eight eyes stared at him, begging for some measure of explanation, anything that would temper their wrath with mercy, he simply gazed at the black iron face of his desk safe. Colin shook his head, unsure if he was angrier at his stepfather or at himself for looking up to the man for so many years.

"Oh, James!" Priscilla wailed, drawing Colin's eyes back to her. She covered her face with both hands even as she erupted into a second flood of tears. "Why? In God's name, why did you do it?"

Then the door was kicked open by a squad of armed soldiers, and the room was plunged into chaos once more. If Priscilla's question truly

had an answer, it went unheard in the commotion of barked orders and chains that heralded the end of Sir James Leeson.

* * *

Had he been a man who was concerned with such things, it might have struck Jerome Arnold as bitterly ironic, the way the presumably final annual Leeson autumn ball came to a close. Though Sir James' retainers put in a most valiant effort to keep the entry of the soldiers a secret from the partygoers, there was no stopping a crowd of curious onlookers from gathering as Sir James was led out of his own house in irons, followed by the shabby form of that accomplice of his named Bertrand.

He did always seem to be so concerned with winning everyone's attention. Now I suppose he has it, thought Jerome with a cold smirk. He started, taken aback by his own thoughts; apparently, he did possess some appreciation for this situation after all, even if it gave him no joy to witness.

After all ... He swallowed, stricken by a horrible question that seemed to have no ready answer. What will happen to Diana now? She is still unmarried, and with her guardian indisposed, action will need to be taken to secure her safety.

The question hung over Jerome like a pall even as he attempted to help Sir James' staff clear the house of any remaining visitors. This was no easy labour, as everyone he encountered wanted nothing more than to extract information about this latest scandal. By the time the Leeson house was quiet once more, Jerome saw from the wall clock that it was already a quarter past midnight. He yawned, struggling to ignore the growling of his empty stomach and the creaking of his weary bones, and was just beginning to wonder how he might get home when he saw his wife standing patiently by the entryway wall.

“Victoria? I thought you’d gone home long—” Jerome was stopped mid-sentence by another colossal yawn.

His wife approached him and affectionately put a hand on Jerome’s thin cheek. “You always were a fool like that, Jerome.” She took his arm and began to walk him towards the door. “Wesley has had the carriage ready for us for some hours now. Let’s get home before the horses fall asleep as well, shall we?”

Jerome smiled and trudged down the carpet with his wife. Their sombre exit was paused when the pair ran into a lone figure standing in a regal posture in front of the door.

“Mister Arnold. Missus Arnold,” said Priscilla Leeson in a quiet voice. Still dressed in a matronly yet elegant gown of midnight blue, it looked to Jerome Arnold as though she were already dressed for mourning. “There is something I want to ask you. You and your good wife both if you do not need to return home immediately.”

Jerome looked to his wife, who was already nodding her assent. The trio made their way to a small salon on the ground floor, and after a brief and anxious scramble to have the room illuminated so they were not sitting in the dark of midnight, they were seated around a low table as quietly and calmly as if it were any normal evening.

For a long while, the three simply sat there while Priscilla Leeson collected her thoughts. She opened her mouth to speak several times, then closed it without a word. After a minute or two of staring out the darkened window and dabbing away tears with a blue handkerchief, Priscilla finally choked out, “I feel so awful for Diana.”

“As do we,” Victoria said, nodding sombrely. “I would ask if there were anything we could do to help ... but I suspect that’s why you’ve invited us to speak at this late hour.” Jerome gave his wife an appreciative look; she had always impressed him with her keen mind.

Priscilla nodded, struggling to look the Arnolds in the eyes through her tears. “My husband ... good God, I don’t know what will become of him. Of any of us. But I do know that he is as resourceful as he is clever. Even with your testimony against him, Mister Arnold, and with whatever evidence Diana and Colin managed to collect, it’s entirely possible that he may be released to return home at any time.”

“I would not be so certain of that,” Jerome said hoarsely. “Whatever the difficulties facing the crown nowadays, murder is still treated as a most grave affair, even for the wealthy.”

Priscilla shook her head slowly as though with great difficulty. “And my husband has many friends, Mister Arnold. Some of them may even be able to intervene on his behalf. And if he is allowed to return here, even for a brief time, and Diana remains under our roof ...”

The implication sent a shiver down the collective spines of the room’s occupants.

“Clearly a situation to be avoided at all costs,” Victoria stated. The other two nodded hurriedly at this pronouncement. “What would you have of us, then?”

Priscilla took in a sharp breath, her face a mask of concern. “Mister Arnold, I am asking you to take over as Diana Hann’s guardian.”

The woman then carried on pleading her case, explaining that she understood there would be some legalities to settle, that she did not wish to burden the Arnolds, and so on. But from the moment this first sentence was uttered, Jerome knew that he wished to accept, and from the subtle squeeze of his hand he received from Victoria at his side, he understood she felt the same way.

All the same, Jerome thought over the matter ... though even the act of thinking was difficult at this late hour, after all the evening had brought them. The woman made a compelling point, to be sure, and he and Victoria had often discussed how they wished they could be in the position of watching over Diana since her parents' tragic accident. But as he looked at Victoria to voice his agreement to this proposition, the sight of the woman he loved brought a sudden thought to his mind.

"Missus Leeson," said Jerome wearily, taking off his spectacles and cleaning them anxiously with his handkerchief. "I cannot find any flaw in your proposition ... save one. If we are to take Diana home with us immediately, this very night, and keep her away from this place and your family for a time as you suggest ..."

"What possible objection could you have to such a proposition?" asked Victoria impatiently.

Jerome replaced the spectacles on his nose and gave Priscilla Leeson a sympathetic look. "Madam, are you aware that Diana is in love with your son?"

Victoria snorted at this characterisation, but Priscilla merely nodded sadly. "And Colin is in love with her. Yes, I have known for some

time. I fear I don't know what is to be done about that, and I fear it will pain them both terribly to be separated, especially when they are both likely to need a sympathetic ear. Or hand. But I confess, I do not know what other course of action we have."

"Nonsense," Victoria put in brusquely. "Colin will stay with us as well, then. After all they've been through, they can stay in the same bloody room for all I care."

He shook his head. "While that might be what they would choose for themselves, my dear, it would be no kindness to either of them. Certainly not to Diana."

Jerome patted his wife's hand, though he knew she would pull away from the patronising gesture. He smiled sadly as he was proven right, then continued, "The poor girl has already been the talk of London in all the worst ways. Lord knows what the newspapers will make of all this business. If it becomes known that she is sharing lodgings with a bachelor, even chaperoned by a pair of mouldering old creatures such as we, her reputation may never recover."

Victoria barked with derisive laughter. "There's been a murder, for God's sake! Her own guardian was hauled away in chains before her very—"

"I'm sorry, Missus Arnold, but you know that will make no difference to the ton," Priscilla interrupted. "And especially until we know if Sir James is to go free or not, I concur. For now, I think it best to keep Diana and Colin as far apart as possible."

The words hung in the air like a deathly chill, stifling any further thought. The silence in the room was complete but for the weak

crackling of the fire dying in the hearth.

“I suppose one of us must go and tell them, then,” Jerome said with a sigh.

Victoria put up her hands, shaking her head sternly. “I will have no part of tearing apart two young lovers. If you truly desire to force them into isolation now, at the worst moment of their lives, you may do so yourself.”

Jerome nodded; he had expected no different from his wife. He glanced at Priscilla and saw how papery her skin appeared, how she was clearly pained by a headache or some other malady in addition to the hell she had just gone through with her own husband.

“Very well. If you’ll excuse me, Missus Leeson. Victoria, if you would please see to any effects that Miss Hann will need in the next day or two?” Jerome rose to his feet, trying to ignore the ache in his knees as he did so, and trudged off in search of Diana and Colin.

It did not take him long to find the pair. After being pointed in the right direction by a sad-eyed matron of the Leeson staff, Jerome found them in the same small library where he had conspired with them but a few hours earlier.

While Jerome would have assumed they might have found somewhere secluded to comfort one another, it seemed one or both of them had remained aware of the social requirements of the ton; they were equally unlikely to be seen here or to cause further scandal if they were discovered. The door was ajar, and Jerome could not help peeking in at the couple before being forced to bring an end, however temporary, to their love affair.

The expression that Diana wore was a peculiar one. *Small wonder, considering what she's gone through in the last twenty-four hours*, thought Jerome. But the change that came over her when Colin Mullens put a comforting hand on her forearm was unmistakable. Jerome had seen the same look on the face of his own dear wife many a time over their long marriage. For a moment, he wondered if their decision might not be too cruel to poor Diana—she had already suffered so much and pulling her away from this man she improbably seemed to love would hurt her still further.

But reason, as it ever did, won out in Jerome's rapid ethical arithmetic. Sighing softly, he pushed open the door fully, drawing the eyes of Diana and Colin away from one another and towards him. He suddenly felt a thousand years old.

Chapter 23

Some Silly Storybook Romance

The night was dark and blissfully quiet. Diana breathed in the still, reverent air at the top of the hill, watching the glittering army of stars twinkle and shine their holy light down upon the cemetery.

Diana had been here before, she seemed to remember, though everything looked different. She rested her hand on the thick trunk of a gnarled old tree, wondering in confusion if it hadn't been cracked or broken somehow. Even the stars above looked more like shattered glass than the fire of distant suns. She listened, expecting to hear a scream, a crash, the sound of horses ... but there was nothing but the distant, melodic hooting of an owl.

And there was something else, Diana thought, turning towards the presence she felt at her side.

Standing on the raw, freshly-dug earth beside the open grave there on the hilltop, she saw a familiar middle-aged man and woman standing side by side. His arm was on her shoulder in a loving gesture, and there was such recognition in their eyes as they looked at her fondly.

“Goodbye, Diana.”

Diana heard the words clearly in her mind, though neither of the spirits moved their lips. A feeling of warmth and familiarity emanated from them like a shining beacon, and Diana could not help smiling.

“Mother ...” Diana felt herself choke on a trickle of tears, though she felt wrapped in a blanket of bliss and tranquillity. “Father ...”

The two ghostly forms shook gently, their edges blurring as if they were mere reflections in a pool of still water. They raised their hands in farewell. Their eyes were so kind, so familiar to her ...

Then the apparitions faded away into nothing but a wistful blue memory, leaving her standing by herself on the grassy hilltop. Diana looked up at the sky, reflecting on the thousands of stars that gazed back down upon her. She wrapped her arms around herself, squeezing herself as she twisted back and forth.

“It’s done,” she said aloud, her words floating out over all the hills and valleys of Britain. “I’m a prisoner no longer. Justice has been done.”

The words were as true and real as breathing out and in. But why, she could not help wondering, did she feel so horribly, tragically lonely?

The moment Diana’s eyes fluttered open, she was assailed by the same crushing feeling of isolation that she had felt in her dream. She blinked, rubbed her eyes, sat up in the bed to find with a start that it was not her own bed. She looked around, alarmed, not recognising any of the strange corners or surfaces that surrounded her ... then relief washed over her, and her breath steadied.

Mister Arnold’s house, Diana thought, putting a hand to her chest as if to will her heart to calmness. My new home. I’m safe, just as Mister Arnold promised me.

Diana gave a mighty stretch and walked to pull open the curtain. Outside she was greeted not by the trees and emptiness of the enormous Leeson house but by the bustling activity of the London streets. She passed nearly half an hour sitting at her seat by the window, gazing out at the throng that paraded past the Arnold house on their way to thousands of interesting things. Not for a single moment did she forget how bitterly sad she yet felt.

It's been more than two weeks since I was freed from that cage. Diana sighed, closing the curtain and turning away from the window to dress herself. I have a new guardian, a home where I am truly safe. With Mister and Missus Arnold to take care of me and my full inheritance available to me, my future is mine to do with as I please.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror as she looked up to wash her face—the sight was enough to steal the breath from her lungs. Where a year ago the girl who peered out at her from the glass was happy and carefree, and four months ago she saw an embattled young woman filled to the brim with guilt and rage ... now all Diana could see was a much older woman. Her strawberry blonde curls were limp and lifeless, her eyes ringed by dark circles, her skin pale and peaked.

For God's sake, everything has worked out perfectly. Why then do I feel so bloody sad?

A soft knock came on the door, startling Diana.

“Diana, dear, are you dressed?” came a kindly voice.

Diana looked down and saw that she was still in her nightgown. She

scurried to the tall folding Oriental screen on the side of the room by the wardrobe that contained the possessions brought over from the Leeson house. "Not yet, Missus Arnold, but you can come in if it's only you."

As she began to dress herself in a pretty if plain rose-coloured dress, Diana heard the door swing open and close again, then soft footsteps move decisively across the floor. "I'm sorry to bother you when you're still just beginning your day, dear," she heard Victoria Arnold call over the screen to her. "I was rather given to think you were something of a lark, you see."

"I suppose I have been allowing myself to grow slothful since coming here, Missus Arnold. The problem must lie in this too-comfortable bed." Diana laughed. Then she paused in her dressing and blinked in confusion. *I have been sleeping quite late these days, indeed, and spending a great deal of time alone in this room even when awake. How does she know I am an early riser?*

She dismissed this thought with a shake of her head and returned to the task at hand. "Please, take a seat, Missus Arnold. I won't be a minute."

She heard a soft grunt as Victoria sat in a chair by the window. What followed as Diana pulled the pink gown over her head was a long stretch of uncomfortable silence —something that was extremely unusual when in Victoria Arnold's company, she had discovered.

"I'm very sorry Mister Arnold has been so absent of late," Victoria said in a strange, uncertain voice. "I expect you must be tired of only having my blather to listen to each morning and evening."

Diana stepped out from behind the screen, now fully dressed, and flashed Victoria a warm smile as she walked to her vanity. "Oh, not at all!" she said with a laugh. "I know that Mister Arnold has been hard at work setting right all the legal and financial matters. Even now that Missus Leeson has done her part to name you and Mister Arnold as my guardians, I understand it has taken a heroic effort to track down and recover all the money and other assets Uncle James took from my inheritance over the last several months."

"Heroic, eh? I suppose you must have spoken to him once or twice, then, if that's what you've been hearing." Victoria snorted with laughter; then the room fell into another silence that Diana could not help feeling was meaningful somehow. *Whatever could be on her mind, I wonder?*

"Still, it must be terribly boring with only me to speak to for these last two weeks," said Victoria casually. From her seat in front of the mirror, Diana could see the woman examining her nails coolly. "Well, and the staff, I suppose, but they are even poorer conversationalists than Mister Arnold. I hope you haven't been too lonely, Diana."

Diana's breath caught in her throat, stopping her hairbrush in the middle of its first stroke. *It has been awful*, she thought, regarding the miserable-looking young woman in the mirror with the yellow-red curls. *Even in my most despondent moments in Uncle James' house, the notion that I always had Colin to talk to kept things from being too unbearable. But now, loving him as I do and being kept from him ...*

She forced herself to continue arranging her hair as she beat back tears. *But I can hardly say such a thing to good Missus Arnold, especially when she and Mister Arnold have done so much to help me.* Diana forced a tight smile onto her lips, seeing Victoria's keen gaze reflected in the mirror. "Oh, no, Missus Arnold. I've been most happy here, thank you."

Diana felt Missus Arnold blink sceptically, being too afraid to let the older woman see the uncertainty in her eyes. "Are you quite sure, my dear? There's nothing you want for, nothing you feel is missing from your life?" Victoria asked softly.

She turned back to brushing her hair, this time twice as fiercely as before. "Nothing. Thank you."

She could see Victoria's reflection standing over her shoulder. The older woman put one thin hand on each of Diana's shoulders and leaned forward with a conspiratorial look on her face. "Well, then, just in the event you do begin to feel lonely, how would you feel about potentially receiving a visit from a Mister Colin Mullens?"

Diana gasped, a hand instinctively flying over her mouth. Turning away from the mirror and looking up at Victoria, she could see the older woman's eyes twinkle with laughter. "I ... I would like that very much," Diana said, wrestling with herself to stop blushing so terribly. "When?"

"Right now, if it's convenient." Victoria patted her gently on the shoulder, her narrow frame shaking with suppressed laughter. "And even if it isn't, he's downstairs with his mother this very minute."

* * *

From the moment she stepped foot in the Arnolds' humble parlour, Diana could scarcely bear to look at Colin. He and his mother were sat at a wide, round table as they waited for her, and as soon as Victoria Arnold escorted her to the room and discreetly excused herself, Diana felt herself grow flushed with nervous energy.

“Missus Leeson. Mister Mullens. So good to see you both,” she said with a polite curtsy, praying she did not collapse on the floor in front of them. Her eyes darted up to Colin, but the sight of those shimmering green eyes looking back at her made her knees grow still weaker. From the thick dark curls atop his head to the nervous smile on his lips to the broad, impressive angle of his shoulders, looking at Colin was like being revisited by a benevolent spirit that had once dominated Diana’s dreaming life.

“Diana,” said Priscilla warmly. She gestured to the empty chair. “Please, do join us.” Neither of the seated figures moved to rise from their chairs, though Colin seemed to squirm a bit more uncomfortably in his place.

As she sat at the table with Priscilla and Colin, Diana felt awash in a feeling of this whole experience being nothing more than a dream. Contributing to this sensation was a strange shaking that reverberated through the table, one that Diana eventually deduced was Colin’s leg jogging anxiously in place. She looked up at him, and their eyes lingered on one another’s in wonderment for no more than a breath before darting away awkwardly.

This is the most peculiar feeling, Diana thought, chewing her lip. *It’s as though I have been lacking a part of myself, as an organ or a limb, and now that Colin is right here before me, I cannot imagine how I did without for the last two weeks.* Among the strange sensations running through her body and mind was an inexplicable sense of fear that, coupled with Priscilla’s presence, kept Diana from acting on any of the thousand things she wanted to say or do with Colin.

Her attention was pulled back to Priscilla as the older woman drew in a long, heavy breath, then rested her hands on the table as she fixed Diana with an intense look. “I know there’s nothing I can say that will

undo everything James did to you, Diana,” she said, her voice weighty with regret. “But I need to tell you how very, very sorry I am for everything you went through in our house. You were treated so terribly, and I am filled with shame that it happened at the hands of my own husband.”

Tears rushed to Diana’s eyes, unbidden. She struggled to keep from erupting into wordless sobs, saying in a soft voice as she looked down at the tablecloth, “I appreciate the sentiment, Missus Leeson. I truly do. But you have nothing to apologise for.”

She sucked in another breath, trying not to look at Colin, though she felt his eyes upon her. “I understand that you still mourn your first husband and that your marriage to Sir James was ultimately done for the good of your family. Knowing something of grief myself, I would never blame you for marrying him, considering what you were going through. Especially as there was no way you could have known what he was to do years later.”

“Thank you for your understanding. All the same ...” Priscilla’s shoulders slumped, her hands reaching for a handkerchief as her cheeks were wetted with tears. Then she shook her head angrily and looked Diana in the eyes once more. “You deserved better from us, Diana.”

“From all of us,” Colin murmured, patting his mother on the hand comfortingly. Priscilla looked at him with gratitude shining in her pale eyes.

They really are both such remarkable people, aren't they? thought Diana in wonder. I scarcely survived for six months in a house with James Leeson. To think that they lived with him for more than two decades and remain such kind, wonderful people ...

Then she started in surprise as Priscilla sighed, pushed herself away from the table, and stood to her feet. For an instant, Diana was terrified that their visit had already come to a close; she looked to Colin despairingly, but his face betrayed no clue as to what was happening.

“I’d very much like to speak with you more, to hear of all that’s happened in the last two weeks ... really, anything you would care to talk to me about,” said Priscilla with a fond smile on her lips. “In fact, it would please me greatly if, despite all that’s gone on, you and I could call one another friends.”

Diana smiled, though she was still confused by what was going on. “I would be honoured, Missus Leeson.”

This seemed to strike Priscilla as a relief. “I’m happy to know that,” she said, giving her son a significant look. “For now, however, I think I will excuse myself for a moment to give the two of you a chance to speak as candidly as you like.”

With this, she exited the parlour, closing the door behind her. Diana’s heart raced, and she glanced back at the door, then at Colin in wonderment. Though he did not seem to be surprised, his face looked an inscrutable tangle of emotions.

“Well ...” Diana began, suddenly unable to think of anything coherent to say.

“Indeed,” Colin answered. Then, their words apparently expended, an oppressive quiet spread over the room like a chill fog.

The sound of the clock ticking on the mantel was almost deafening; the silence in the room was so complete. Diana burned for him to say something to her, anything at all ... and at the same time, she found her tongue frozen in her mouth. Any words she might have thought to speak seemed so woefully inadequate that she shied away from them entirely.

Their eyes met, then veered away from one another just as quickly. Nervous laughter echoed from the ceiling—first Colin’s, then Diana’s.

This is ridiculous, Diana thought, her cheeks colouring with embarrassment. For the first time in my life, I know so clearly what I want, and here he is before me ... yet after all our clever wordplay and duelling wits, we sit here in silence like a pair of nervous schoolchildren!

“I ...” Colin began to say. Then, as Diana looked up at him expectantly, he paused to clear his throat. “I suppose you may have guessed that I told my mother about ... well, about you and I.”

Diana smiled, trying to ignore how warm her cheeks grew at the topic he had raised. “I would guess that she was less than surprised.”

Colin laughed, then reached a hand behind his neck and rubbed it in a charmingly awkward gesture. “You would be correct. For all she has gone through in her life, my mother remains a very perceptive woman.”

“And a kind one.”

“That most of all,” Colin said with a nod. Then Diana saw him grow morose once more, and it was as though a small piece of her was crushed beneath a stone. Her mind raced to follow Colin to whatever dark corner he had fled into and immediately seized upon the answer.

“I’m so sorry about your stepfather, Colin.” Under the table, her fingers idly wrung at her skirt, wrinkling it in her distress. “I will not say that he was a good man, but I know how much he meant to you. It must be so painful to have gone through all this.”

Colin winced, then folded his legs and weakly smiled in a feeble attempt at being unbothered. “I confess, it has been extremely difficult. Confronting the person Sir James truly is has been the second-most difficult task I have faced in my life.”

Only second-most? Diana wondered. She held her tongue, allowing him to continue speaking.

He looked closely at her with those glistening emerald eyes. “Despite all, though, some miserably mature part of me is glad that I know the truth. And all of me is relieved that we were able to right this terrible wrong before he could do you further injury.”

“I ... I don’t believe ... no, I’m certain I wouldn’t have prevailed had it not been for you, Colin,” said Diana, trying not to choke on her incipient tears.

Colin sputtered in disbelief at this, giving Diana a sceptical shake of his head. “You are a resourceful woman, Diana. Even if I had not been there to provide the key for the safe, I have no doubt you would have

—”

“No,” Diana interrupted. “That is ... that’s not what I mean. Without you, I would not have survived in that house long enough to go looking through that study.”

He looked away, scowling. “That’s kind of you to say. But I can’t help wondering if it would have been an easier task if I had not stood in your way for so long. If I had simply believed what you told me all along instead of rushing to defend that miserable, evil ...”

Then he stopped himself with an exaggerated hand motion and looked at Diana directly once more. “Thank you. I’m sorry, and thank you.” He winced. “You know what I mean, I hope.

“I do. And you’re welcome.” She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

He glanced at the window, the floor, the table; Diana could see his mind racing to summon the right words.

At last, he spoke them, looking her right in the eye with a piercing stare. “Have you given any thought to ... well, to how you intend to proceed? With living your life, I mean?” Colin stopped and chuckled, abashed at the clumsiness of his words. “That is, have you come to any decisions related to your future, Diana?”

The sound of her name on his lips sent a shiver of excitement through Diana, making it even more difficult to keep her mind on her words. “Not really, to tell you the truth. I’ve had a devil of a time thinking of

anything at all, really. I suppose I shall be in the Arnolds' care until such time as I am married, assuming—"

"Is that something you desire?" Colin asked abruptly. "To marry, have a family, and all that?"

She swallowed, hoping Colin would not see that her heart had skipped a beat. "I ... suppose it would depend on the man," Diana said cautiously. Then she leaned forward ever so slightly, her voice lowering in volume. "And what of you? What does Colin Mullens intend to do with himself in these strange times?"

A sick look crossed Colin's face. He looked out the window at the colourful foliage that stubbornly hung onto the scraggly branches of some of the few London trees. Diana felt her heart twist into a knot at the sight of his distress.

"The last two weeks without you have been ... very difficult for me, Diana," he spoke distantly. "In fact, I should say it's been the first-most difficult thing in my life."

There it is, Diana thought.

"I cannot imagine how it can be that awful. After all, you've already spent more than five-and-twenty years without me," she quipped, hoping to coax Colin's smile back onto his handsome face. She immediately regretted the impulse when she saw how pained he looked.

"Please, Diana. Let me speak my piece," he said in a serious voice that

was utterly alien to her. She nodded, but the suffering on his features was enough to make her want to cry out.

Will I ever see that charming, carefree Colin again? Diana thought, swallowing something that felt like broken glass. *The man I grew to know in the Leeson gardens was so confident, so sure of himself ...*

After several long moments of staring down at his hands, Colin said in a soft voice, "In truth, I can barely remember what life felt like in those five-and-twenty years. Even in my memory, the world seems ... cold, colourless, empty. There have been times these last two weeks when I desperately wished I could go back to that existence, barren though it now seems to me."

Then he looked at Diana, his eyes glistening with tears even as his strong jaw was set firmly, his jiggling leg now still. "But that is an idle fantasy, a child's fantasy. And even if what I now intend to do is as silly as any storybook romance, I know that I must try, as not trying might be the death of me."

Colin stretched out a hand across the table, and without even considering what she was doing, Diana put her own hand atop his. He clutched it tightly, squeezing life into her with the merest touch of his skin.

"Diana ..." He paused to take a breath. She could see his heart beating in his temples, his throat bobbing with emotion. "I cannot imagine going on living without you. If there is any chance, no matter how remote, that you might—"

"Yes."

His eyes shot up to her, wide with surprise.

“Yes, you dolt, I’ll marry you.” Diana laughed. The words flowed through her like warm light, refilling her with all the happiness that had been missing. And as she saw the purest, most beautiful smile return to Colin’s lips, she felt herself grow even more full of happiness, so much so that she wondered if she might burst.

Then he swept her up into his arms with all the art and elegance of a storybook prince, and as their lips met in a glorious confluence, Diana wondered no more.

Epilogue

The wedding came not more than two weeks after this proposal when the countryside was in the full flower of autumn's red-orange glow.

Diana was reasonably sure she had Victoria Arnold to thank for the haste of their engagement. From her little bedroom, she had overheard Mister Arnold pleading for a longer wait for the sake of propriety, but evidently, his wife had made her decision. So two weeks it was.

Two weeks that felt longer than two years, to be sure. But they had come and gone, and now, so had the wedding.

As Diana sat in the carriage that lurched and jumped down the London streets, she could not help reflecting on the strangeness of the wedding. For most of her life, it had been a vague, ill-defined certainty in her future; for the months that she had been all but promised to Gerard Dunn, it had been an object of dread that hurried to her all too quickly; since Colin had proposed to her, it could not come quickly enough.

Now, and forevermore, it would exist only in her past, in the distant and exotic country of memory. And though it had just taken place before her very eyes, she felt almost unsure whether or not it had really happened.

Oh, she had no shortage of memories of the event, of course, ones she knew she would cherish for the rest of her days. Diana remembered how Victoria Arnold, of all people, had cried long and loud throughout the ceremony and had nearly beaten poor Mister Arnold

over the head when he tried to shush her. She remembered how surprised she was to see Adam Radcliffe shyly invite Leah Reid to dance and how even more shocking it had been to see Leah happily accept this invitation.

She remembered how gracious Gerard Dunn had been when he congratulated the couple, and she remembered that she meant to thank Colin for insisting on inviting him to the event. She remembered how she had shaken and fretted all the while, enough so that she was unsure she had said more than two words the whole day—though, naturally, these two words were not lacking in import. Most of all, she remembered how impossibly handsome Colin had appeared

But as she ran these recollections through her mind over and over while the Leeson carriage conveyed them to their new home, Diana could not help feeling wistful that the day was over ... nearly, at least. For all her life, her wedding had been only a potential in the future, and now it was in the past, no less unreal for the fact that it had truly happened.

Everything feels so unreal these days, she thought with a troubled sigh.

But then she was happily pulled back into the present by the merest touch of Colin's hand on hers. She looked up into those piercing green eyes and saw a perfect reflection of herself glinting in the lamplight, just above the same self-assured smile she had fallen in love with over and over again.

"Surely married life cannot be quite that distressing to you, my love?" Colin asked, leaning in close and nearly whispering it in her ear. "Though from the complaints I have heard from everyone but the Arnolds, that might be more common than we realised." The sensation of his breath against her skin set her to giggling, her inner parts awash in an intoxicating rush of desire.

“Why are you whispering?” Diana whispered back to him. “There’s only you and I here in the carriage.”

Colin made a face as though he were sincerely considering the question. Diana watched his finger rub against his strong chin and could not help imagining the sensations of that organ against other, unexplored places.

“I suppose I have simply grown used to sneaking around with you,” he declared in another breathy whisper. “Unless my darling bride would prefer I be bolder, less constrained in sharing my love for you?”

Diana leaned her head against his shoulder, enjoying the feeling of close contact that she had not been able to stop thinking of for the previous four weeks. All the uncertainty plaguing her was now gone in an instant—this moment, this unquestionable presence, was truer than anything she had ever known. She was here, and so was Colin, and that was beautiful enough to bring tears to her eyes.

“I suppose that would be pleasing enough,” she said softly, linking her fingers with his in the space between their laps. “Perhaps I can even teach you, with time enough.”

“No time for that; we’ve our whole lives to get to.” Colin cupped his hands over his mouth and leaned over Diana to throw open the carriage window. “*I adore my wife!*” he bellowed merrily. “*My love for her knows no bounds!*”

“Stop that!” Diana laughed, struggling to pull him back into the

carriage.

“Not even she herself can stop me from proclaiming my love for her from all the hills and rooftops of—”

“Get back in here, you oaf!” He complied as he fell into her lap, and the two collapsed into a giggling tangle of twisted garments and limbs, where they happily remained until the carriage at last arrived at where they meant to spend the rest of their lives.

The house they had settled on was small, to be sure—much smaller than the Leeson house, though Colin and Diana had pooled their funds to purchase it. The whole purchasing process had been hurried and haphazard over the past two weeks, but they had secured this little old house on the edge of the woods with the help of the Arnolds, and the cosy little place had occupied a great deal of space in Diana’s imagination as she thought of what it would be to live there. Especially to live there with the man she loved, in the absence of chaperones or guardians.

But for all her imagining, when Colin pushed open the door with his foot and carried her across the threshold, Diana felt wholly unprepared for the euphoric feelings that washed over her.

Diana saw that the house had been made ready for them, with a fire burning merrily in the hearth and many of their possessions already put in their proper places—another of Victoria Arnold’s loving touches, she thought fondly, or perhaps Priscilla’s.

She gaped, wandering from one modest yet attractive room to the next. So much was familiar in this place, though she had never seen anything so wonderful in her life. Paintings, furniture, dishware—all

from her parents' house, things she had neither seen nor thought about in months. It was as though this place was truly the home she was always meant to have. Running a finger along the frame of a beautiful portrait of her parents hanging in the entryway of the little house, Diana happily felt tears trickle down her cheeks in awe.

"Everything to your liking, I trust?" Colin asked, leaning casually in the doorway on one cocked elbow. "If not, I'm sure I can have Missus Arnold come over immediately and browbeat the furnishings into a more suitable configuration."

"It's just ... I cannot believe that this house, this place, all of *this* ... that it's mine!" She winced, correcting herself. "Ours, that is."

Colin ambled closer to her, looking casually at the portrait, the armoire, the grandfather clock in the corner. "Now, now, there's no need for me to be greedy," he said in a nonchalant voice. "We can say this portrait belongs to you, even now that we are married. And this carpet—this was in my study, and I confess that I never much cared for it."

Something tickled the back of Diana's neck, sensing the uncharacteristic lull in Colin's voice. She took a step back, sensing some sort of playful ambush, but was too late, as she felt his hand reach out and goose her ample bottom through her thin wedding dress. "I shall be quite content with only *this* to my name, thank you very much!" he crowed.

Diana cried out, giggling and leaping out of his grasp, but Colin was right behind her, pinching her hips and thighs in a flurry of movement.

Their play guided them over and through every room in the little house, and though Diana felt her hair growing bedraggled and out of place, her beautiful new wedding dress wrinkled and soiled with dust, she could not bring herself to care. The two frolicked and laughed their way up the stairs, Diana making it into their bedroom a few steps ahead of her groom. Breathing hard, heart pounding, she looked around the handsome little bedroom for anything she could use to surprise Colin, briefly considering shutting the door on him and making him beg for entry when he tramped into the room after her. She wheeled around, looking at him with a smile full of mischief, only to see him suddenly stop in his tracks.

“What is it?” Diana asked, seeing that Colin’s expression had suddenly grown grave.

“I’m just confounded by the most puzzling thing,” he said thoughtfully. “... How is it you look more and more beautiful every time I look at you?”

Diana’s concern melted at these words, and as she saw an unguarded smile spread across Colin’s face, she found there was nothing in the world she wanted more than to be close to her new husband. The two drew close and embraced there, standing on the new bedroom carpet—our *bedroom*, Diana thought with a thrill—and for the second time, they kissed as man and wife.

Their previous kisses stolen in the garden or surreptitiously in Diana’s bedroom at the Leeson house had been wonderful, to be sure. Yet if those furtive embraces were sparks grown into glowing bonfires, this kiss was the very sun itself. All the trials and banalities of the world burned away, obliterated by the glowing bliss that suffused every particle of her being.

Her tongue brushed against his ever so slightly before he pulled it

away, and the fire burned hotter and higher still. She felt her breath catch in her throat, then pump into and out of her body with an intensity she had never known. Every inhalation brought more of her husband's body into her, his smell lingering in her nose and filling her with a burning, unquenchable need that she had never known before. Their breaths seemed to come as one, and as Diana felt Colin's arms wrap around her and hold her tight, bringing her lips to his for another long and passionate kiss, she felt their hearts beat in time.

For all the pleasure they had forged together with words, tonight words seemed utterly irrelevant. It was as though they had conceived of a wholly new means of communication, one through touch and sensation alone, that was a thousand times superior to speech.

"Oh!" Diana cried, feeling Colin's hand roughly cup her bottom again. This was no tickle like before but a teasing instigation of further pleasures to come. Her mind was a frenzy of ecstasy and longing, the yearning she felt almost painful. With every breath, with every fibre of her being, she ached for him to keep touching her, to touch her as no one ever had. And he complied, probing her mouth with his own as she continued to drink in the deliciousness of his mouth, his scent, his very being.

Not daring to pull their mouths away from one another lest this singular moment of joy fly away like an exotic bird, Diana felt Colin tug the neckline of her dress, his hand searching beneath the blue silk and roving across her taut, pale skin. She cried out again as his fingers encountered the fullness of her breast, and as she saw the delight on her husband's face at the contact, she felt herself grow warm with lust, her feminine flower blossoming in readiness.

They were dancing, Diana thought—no, not dancing but flying, and shedding their clothing as they did so, drawing closer with every motion to the bed that lay in wait for them by the smoking fireplace. Diana marvelled at the strange hardness of Colin's body, the muscles of his arms feeling so deliciously alien beneath her fingers even as he

seemed to revel in all the soft curves of her milky-white skin. He looked to her, a momentous question barely shrouded beneath the electric green surface of his gorgeous eyes, and Diana's heart sang as she nodded her assent.

They tumbled through space; their bodies intertwined, so simultaneously like and yet unlike the play they had just engaged in previously. She felt Colin's lips caress strange and half-forgotten corners of her body—her neck, her collarbones, her shoulders—and with each kiss, she felt the hunger in her grow still more voracious.

Diana felt her every muscle tense, her breath coming out in ragged gasps as his fingers drew apart the warm, shaking lines of her thighs. She forced her eyes to open, desperate to see the look on her husband's face as he became one with her as she had longed for on so many lonely nights ... yet his was a teasing, playful touch, only brushing against the dark corners of her femininity. Each time she felt herself grow ready for his body to enter her, instead, he gave a deft, subtle twist of his fingers, drawing another gasp of pleasure from somewhere deep within her soul.

“Are you truly in such a hurry to move on from this?” Colin cooed, settling himself into a position that allowed his fingers—*God, those wonderful, unbelievable, thrice-damned fingers!*—purchase to tickle and tease at her womanhood with impunity.

Even the smallest gesture from him wracked her body with waves of hitherto-unknown delight, carrying her ever closer to a terrifying peak ... only for him to pull away, stepping back to return to soft kisses at her cheek or long, luxuriant embraces in which he drank her in and savoured her like a fine wine.

“You do seem to enjoy that,” Colin mused, the reverence clear in his voice even as his face was alight with playfulness. “But then, I suppose

I could always—”

“You talk too much,” Diana growled in a wanting, guttering voice that she hardly recognised as her own. And even as Colin smiled at this pronouncement, she surprised him by wrapping her hands around the back of his head and pulling him up to kiss her, drawing his own eager organ of love roaring into her.

“*Oh—*” they breathed as one, their bodies moving in perfect synchrony with one another. Lost in a trancelike state beyond words, beyond thought, Diana sensed that whatever had been missing from her was now found, that she was now complete in a way that would change her existence forever.

His hands were all over her, his fingers roughly grabbing her quivering breast even as the other caressed her cheek tenderly. Diana scarcely knew what her own body was doing; her hand was at once clutching the bedclothes for greater purchase and raking Colin’s broad, muscular back, eliciting pleasurable grunts from him as she did so.

Their voices mingled in their wordless chant. Every second stretched into eternity as Diana felt her thighs wrap around Colin, pulling him closer to her, his body tighter and harder, their hearts crying out louder and burning hotter and ...

“Diana,” Colin exhaled even as any thought left Diana entirely. This single word heralded the moment when they crested this mysterious summit as one being, one flesh. They cried out in a long, unbroken song of ardour, their impossibly singular moment stretching out to blot out all the world, its past and future, in a perfect white light.

The air they breathed in the warm, comfortable little room seemed to be filled with stars. Feeling a strong arm wrap around her shoulder and pull her in close, Diana rested her head against Colin's broad, muscular chest and sighed happily. She felt his weight, the substance of his body, heard the peace in his breath, and fell into as deep and wonderful a sleep as she had ever known.

Her final thought before that glorious day receded into the patchwork beauty of memory was the sudden and absolute realisation that her dreams would never be truly troubled again so long as she lived.

THE END

Can't get enough of Diana and Colin? Then make sure to check out the

[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

*How will the married couple deal with the sudden unwanted publicity with
the rest of the Ton?*

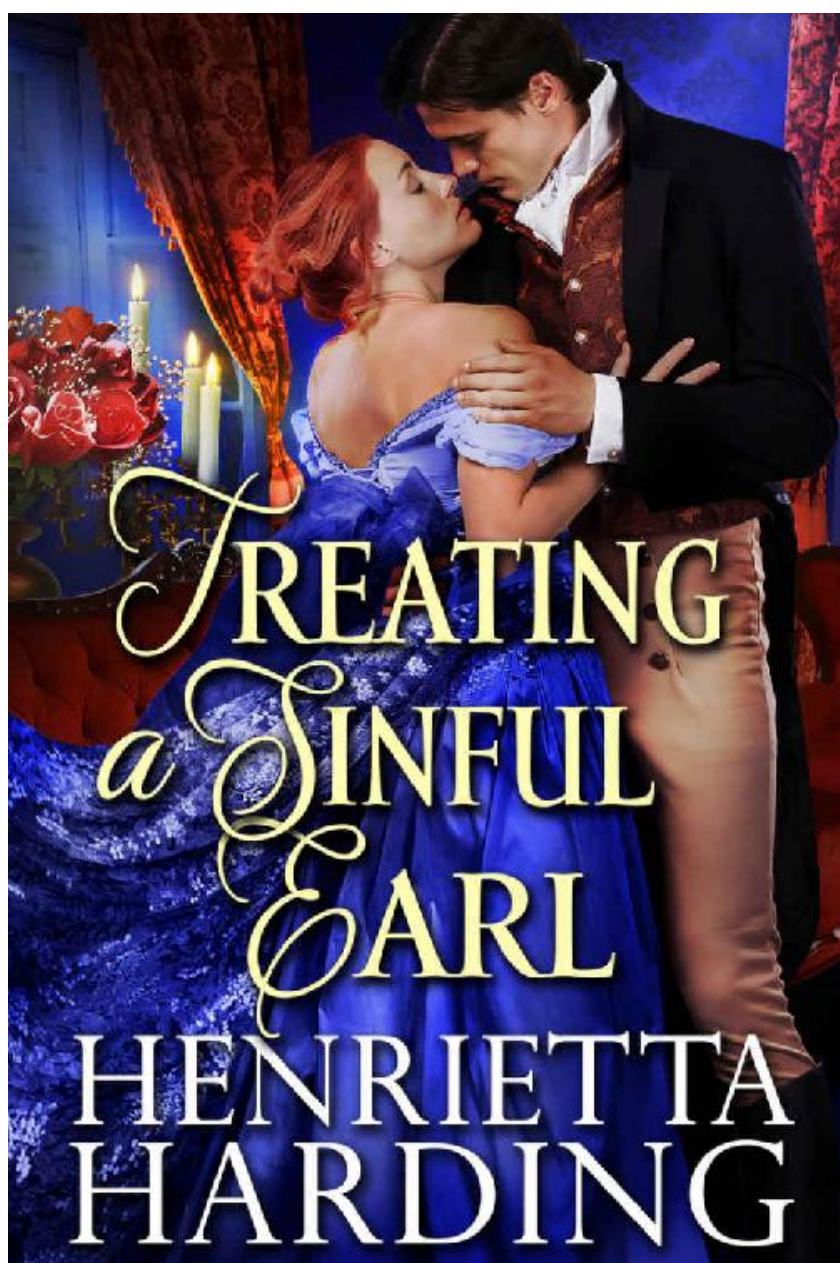
*How will an unexpected letter affect the relationship between Diana and
Priscilla?*

What will Priscilla ask of Colin and how will he respond?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

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*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**Treating a Sinful Earl**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



Treating a Sinful Earl

Introduction

The ravishing Lady Catherine Trowbridge has a scandalous secret that she keeps from society, and alas, must find a husband in Bath this very season. This precarious fate is made all the more challenging when she comes across the handsome and tempting Earl of Simmons, the first man to ever capture her body and soul. Yet, what will the seductive Catherine do when she discovers that things may not be as they seem?

A man with a haunting secret of his own...

The enthralling Earl of Simmons does not live up to the rumours that surround him. An enticing man of great standing in society, condemned by a dreadful illness... He fears that his days might be numbered. However, after meeting a woman that awakens his hidden desires and makes him feel powerful again, he dares to risk his life for love. Can this alluring Lady be the missing piece of his happiness?

If only their lust for one another was enough to defy fate itself...

Unfortunately, Catherine and Jasper know that time is not on their side, but in one another's arms, time stands still. Can Catherine's mysterious talent revive Jasper's health? While they both dread their fates, will their passionate affair defeat all their hardships, including

Jasper's deadly illness?

Chapter 1

Lord Jasper Spranklin, Earl of Simmons, gazed around the populated ballroom, wiping a bit of sweat from his brow. It was stifling but this heat did not temper his enjoyment in the slightest.

There were plenty of lovely ladies all around, wearing their shiny gossamer frocks, many with feathers in their hair, as was the fashion of the day. Although Jasper would usually be more discerning when it came to dancing with ladies, he was now holding back no longer.

“Good evening,” he said to one lady in particular, bowing his head.

She fluttered her eyelashes, and a flush came to her cheeks. “Good evening, my lord,” she said with a curtsy.

“Most certainly. Such a marvellous event!”

“That it is, indeed.”

She stood there in stunned silence for a moment, perhaps waiting for Jasper to carry on the conversation. He was used to women being struck dumb in his presence, for he was told that he was a handsome fellow. But what Jasper did not like was ladies who were so bashful in his presence. Jasper preferred a woman who could speak, and what’s more, a woman who could hold an intelligent conversation.

That being said, the lady standing before him who was struck dumb

was still quite pretty.

“Should I check my dance card?” the lady finally asked, no doubt implying that she and Jasper should dance.

“That would be most kind of you, but I am afraid that I do not know your name. I am the Earl of Simmons,” Jasper went on.

“Yes, I know who you are, my lord. I am Miss Kitty Spencer. We have never had a chance to formally meet.”

The casual conversation continued, and Jasper concluded that it would be enjoyable to dance with Miss Kitty Spencer, but he did not feel that strong pull towards her that he sought. Yes, she was a bit dull, and she continuously fluttered her fan in front of her face trying to amplify her appeal.

The dance being scheduled, Miss Kitty excused herself lest she tarry for too long, and just as she departed, Jasper felt as though the room was spinning and sweat trickled from his brow more forcefully. He feared that he might faint. Jasper quickly found a seat where he could steady himself, and once there, he loosened his cravat and reasoned that his valet had tied it too tight.

Of course, he would be deluding himself if he believed that last thought. The cravat did not explain the heat or suddenly feeling faint. He knew the source of these things, but it was difficult to admit to himself. Just then, Jasper spotted his very best friend, Felton Andrews, just across the way. Felton was flirting with two ladies, and this brought a smile to Jasper's lips, helping him to forget, for a moment, about the fainting spell.

Felton and Jasper had known each other since they were young boys, and his friend was always a source of fun and mischief. They liked to get into a bit of trouble when they were together, and during the Season, a little trouble was not difficult to find.

Jasper heaved a sigh of relief. Yes, the faint feeling had passed, and he was himself again! He stood to his full height, which was considerably tall, for Jasper surmised that he stood above the rest in the ballroom. He caught his reflection in a mirror and inspected himself.

No, he was not the kind of man that paid too much mind to his appearance, although his bearing was overall neat and refined. He did not care for the foppish ways of some of the other men at that event.

His blond hair was a bit wayward, but his blue eyes sparkled. He was often told that his eyes were the most captivating aspect of his appearance, and these he had inherited from his beloved mother. Thinking of the Dowager Countess, Jasper felt his heart constrict in his chest. She was the only one that knew. She was the only one that knew the truth about Jasper's diagnosis....

Banishing these thoughts, Jasper thought it best to seize the day and dance with as many ladies as he could, enjoying life to the fullest. That was the only way to proceed. For when faced with challenges, his perspective was always strong. Life was something to be lived to the fullest and Jasper would have it no other way. He would not get weighed down in melancholy. He would enjoy every last moment.

Just then, he watched as Felton approached, carrying a flute of champagne. "What are you doing by yourself when there is much flirting to undertake?" Felton asked.

Jasper could not help but laugh. "There is indeed much flirting, and I was taking a break because it can be exhausting!"

"Do not lie, my friend. You find flirting exhilarating. There is no need to pretend that I am not the one that knows you best in this world."

Jasper's heart constricted in his chest once more. Yes, Felton knew him best, so why could he not tell his friend that very important bit of information that constantly lurked in the back of his mind? Jasper reasoned that it would be too difficult. Yet still, he would tell his friend when the moment was ripe.

Just then, something caught Felton's eye, and he said, "Have you met that lady over there?"

Jasper looked in the direction that Felton motioned towards. He knit his brow, not recognizing the lady but finding her to be beautiful. "Who is she?"

"That is Lady Abigail Hatcher. I am surprised that you do not know of her. She attends these balls often. In fact, no one enjoys a party more than Abigail Hatcher."

"Then it is quite surprising that I have never made her acquaintance. Should we approach?" Jasper asked.

"When the moment is ripe. For now, we drink!" Felton said, lifting his empty flute. "Come, the refreshments are this way."

Jasper followed his friend, but truth be told, he was not one for too much drink. He preferred to keep his wits about him at all times, and there was no sense in needing champagne to feel enjoyment. Jasper enjoyed life as it was, and heavens, how he wished to enjoy as much of it as possible.

Still, he took a flute and clinked it against Felton's glass. "Why did you point out this Abigail Hatcher?" Jasper asked, sensing something significant.

His brow raised. "I fancy her. Unfortunately, I fear that she might be out of my league."

"Every lady here is out of your league, old chap. Let us face the truth."

Both men smiled. In truth, Jasper loved teasing Felton at every possible juncture. They had shared the same humour since they were young boys, and sometimes he sensed that Felton was the only one who understood his biting wit.

"Go and speak with her," Jasper advised.

Felton shook his head. "This is why I am trying to drink as much champagne as possible. I need the courage."

"I have never known you to be one that is lacking in courage when it comes to the ladies."

“With Abigail Hatcher, everything is different.”

"What is it about her that you find so appealing?" Jasper asked, taking a sip of his own champagne.

“Everything. The way that she goes from party to party in her elegant gowns, the manner in which she dances, and how she entirely ignores me.”

Jasper placed a humorous hand upon Felton’s shoulder. “Old chap, there is something that must be made clear here and now. You should probably not go after women that do not give you the time of day. You might want to choose those that pay attention to you, instead.”

“But it is so appealing!” Felton exclaimed. “When a lady pretends as though you do not exist, it brings up every predatory instinct that a man has within his breast. It is a challenge, and I love a good challenge!”

Jasper removed his hand and shook his head mournfully. “I fear that you are in for a bumpy path to love.”

“You do not find it appealing when you are ignored?”

Jasper had to consider this question. Yes, he understood how when a woman was particularly hard to steal the attention of, it did incite something in a man. Like Felton, Jasper liked a good challenge, but

considering the other challenges that he faced, he would be content to find a woman with a pretty face, a sparkling mind and wit, and also, someone who genuinely liked him. There was no time for anything else.

Just then, Felton's attention was stolen once more, and Jasper looked off into the distance. There was Abigail Hatcher again, but this time, she was joined by two other ladies, and there was one in particular that Jasper could not take his eyes off of.

"Who is that?" he had to ask.

"Which one? Abigail is the brunette, then there is the blonde and the redhead."

"The redhead," Jasper said definitively.

An amused smile appeared on Felton's lips. "I see. She would certainly be to your liking."

"What do you mean?" Jasper asked in confusion.

"You like the exotic ones, do you not? Yes, Lady Catherine Trowbridge would definitely be to your liking, with the shining red hair and green eyes. Most exotic indeed." Felton winked.

Jasper did not wish to be caught staring, yet still, he could not take his eyes off of Catherine. How was it that he never met her before, or

Abigail for that matter? Had Jasper been living under a rock, and if so, could he now set himself free?

“And who is the blonde?”

“That would be Selina Lockhart, Catherine’s closest friend. You would do well to be viewed as favourable in her estimation. Believe me, Selina and Catherine are nearly as close as you and I.”

“Is that even possible?” Jasper quipped.

The two friends shared a good laugh, but Jasper’s attention returned to Catherine yet again. Even from afar, there was something relaxed and natural about her, despite the exotic beauty. She wore a simple white gown, and her figure was lean, athletic, and most impressive. That being said, she was diminutive in height, and Jasper feared that his own height might provide some intimidation.

But what was he thinking? He had not even met the lady yet! There was still a chance that she had a squeaky voice or not a thought in her head.

“How is it that you are so well-informed about these ladies?”

“Unlike you,” Felton went on, “I learn as much about those around me as possible. You, however, merely carry on as though you are the only man in the world.”

Jasper was confused by this. "That is untrue. I merely keep to my own affairs. At least...of late that is the case."

"And thus, all the ladies love you," Felton replied, rolling his eyes. "It goes both ways, you realize. When a woman is distant, a man's attention is piqued. And when a man is distant, all the ladies seem to swoon."

This was all news to Jasper. Felton had never referred to him as distant before. Could it be that the recent news about his health had caused this? No, this was always Jasper's manner. He kept to himself, gave his attention to those that he found interesting, and did not seek out anyone for selfish reasons. He was a self-contained sort of fellow. This kept things simple for him.

And Jasper needed things to be simple right now.

"Come, I am ready to speak with them," Felton said, putting down his empty champagne flute.

"Now I am the one that is nervous," Jasper replied, feeling that customary sweat come to his brow.

"Nonsense. You are the most dashing man in the room, and Catherine Trowbridge must have noticed that by now."

Chapter 2

Lady Catherine Trowbridge was at a loss for words. How was it that Abigail fit into society so effortlessly? In fact, Abigail Hatcher was the toast of the town! For Catherine, this was certainly not the case. As Abigail and Selina carried on, Catherine was left to think about her garden back at home, and how much she missed the hounds and horses.

“Catherine, you are daydreaming again,” Abigail scolded with a smile.

“This is not anything that I am accustomed to.”

“Then make yourself accustomed to it.” Abigail placed two friendly hands upon her bare shoulders. “You know that it is inevitable. You were saying last week that your mother and father wait in anticipation of a marriage.”

Selina added, “Do not put so much pressure upon her, Abigail. I see Catherine as the sort of lady that does not require a gentleman. She could spend the rest of her days riding her horse and reading her books, perfectly content.”

Catherine could not help but smile. Selina knew her all too well, perhaps better than Abigail did. What’s more, Selina always accepted Catherine, just the way that she was. This left a rather pleasant feeling in Catherine’s heart.

Abigail removed her hands from Catherine’s shoulders and rolled her eyes. Why was it that she was so intent upon Catherine marrying?

“Abigail, you cannot scold me for not finding a husband when you yourself do not have one!” Catherine protested.

Abigail crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I am in no hurry to be wed. There are far too many fetching gentlemen in Bath. I should like to dance with all of them before I make a decision!”

Now, Catherine was the one to roll her eyes playfully. Abigail could be so conceited at times, and although she loved her friend dearly, Catherine knew that Abigail’s haughtiness might get her into trouble one of these days.

Oh, but Bath was ever so pleasant this time of year, and it made it easy to distract oneself from such thinking! Catherine already planned to walk down to the coast the following morning. How could marriage be so important when there was the sea, the sky, and the healing waters of the town? She estimated that she was very fortunate that her parents, the baron and baroness, did not send her to London for the Season. It would be abominable. There would be nowhere to escape.

“Come, let us find some eligible bachelors,” Abigail exclaimed, looking about the room as though she were on the hunt.

“I am nervous,” Catherine admitted, not liking the notion of having to converse with men that she did not know.

Selina surmised, “It is most fortunate that ladies are not allowed to approach men, Catherine. That way, you can stand here, being your beautiful self, merely waiting for them to come to you.”

Catherine constricted her brow in curiosity. What was Selina implying? She felt no more beautiful than her friends, but Selina was making it sound as though there was something particularly special about Catherine's appearance. This made no sense to her in the slightest.

"Oh, heavens! Selina, do you see what I see?" Abigail asked. She nodded her head in the direction of two gentlemen directly across the ballroom.

Catherine watched as Selina's mouth dropped open in shock. "Is that Felton Andrews?" she asked, returning her attention to Abigail.

"Indeed." Abigail raised her brow. "In fact, I caught him looking this way earlier in the evening. I think that he is positively spying on us!"

"Who is Felton Andrews?" Catherine asked earnestly.

"Catherine, you really must go to more balls. Mr Andrews is at every single one! Oh, he is ever so handsome, and I hear tell that he has some kind of sentiment for me." Abigail tossed her head to the side in pride. "Not that he is all that spectacular. In fact, I have seen more handsome gentlemen." Her voice became hushed. "But I do fancy him, I must admit. Yet, I cannot let on as such. If Mr Andrew approaches then I shall be as cool as the waters of Bath. There's no benefit to letting a man know that you have feelings for him."

Catherine thought this abominable. She did not care for the games that society played. What's more, if she were ever to fancy a man, she would tell him plainly. But these thoughts vanished as Catherine had a chance to view the gentleman just to Felton Andrews' left. "Who is that?" she asked in a small voice.

Abigail grinned from ear to ear. "Catherine, there is so much for you to learn. If you do not know who that man is, then you are past help." Her voice turned mischievous. "That is Lord Jasper Spranklin."

"Lord Jasper Spranklin?" Catherine asked, having never heard the name. Oh, but he was ever so handsome and tall!

"The Earl of Simmons?" Abigail said, waiting for recognition to take hold. "You do not know the Earl? Why, I am positively aghast. Everyone knows Simmons, as the more distinguished call him. He is perhaps the most handsome man in all of Bath."

Catherine examined him from afar once more. Yes, the blond hair and blue eyes were striking enough. In fact, he almost looked like a painting with his defined jaw and brow. Then, she caught him looking right at her, and Catherine turned away in fright!

"Was he just viewing you?" Selina asked.

"I believe that he was." Catherine brought a hand up to her warm cheek.

Abigail went on, "If you can capture the heart of Simmons, you might be the luckiest girl in all of London."

Catherine considered this. What was it about Simmons that Abigail found so appealing? Did he have a great deal of wealth? Noble

parentage? Maybe he was a fine conversationalist.

“I have never seen a man so handsome,” Selina cooed. “But I daresay, he rarely attends balls. No one can seem to understand why. He could have himself a wife within moments if he wished to!”

Catherine found herself feeling rather curious about this Simmons fellow. Yes, he was viewing her once more! She looked down at her simple white dress, wondering what all the fuss might be about. Off to the right, a large mirror hung in the ballroom, and she gazed at her reflection. Yes, she had always been told that she was pretty, but Catherine did not see anything beautiful about her auburn hair and green eyes.

Returning her attention to Simmons across the room, their eyes locked, and Catherine feared that she might never be able to look away. Those ocean eyes were transfixing, and what’s more, there was kindness behind them.

“Catherine, don’t be caught staring!” Abigail scolded.

She cleared her throat nervously. “I suppose that he is rather handsome.”

“Catherine is flushing from ear to ear!” Selina exclaimed, taking out her fan and pumping it in front of her face. “Your blush has caused me to blush.”

All three girls laughed at this. It was rather funny that Catherine had had such a reaction to the Earl of Simmons. It was rare for her to have

such a visceral reaction to a man. She felt her heart flutter in her chest and promised herself that she would not look back again. It would be impossibly forward to do so. "Let us talk of something else," Catherine said, hoping that the flush might cool if the ladies spoke of gardening, horseback riding, or perhaps scheduling a picnic by the sea.

Although she hoped for distraction, this was not afforded to her as Abigail observed, "They are coming this way!"

Selina fanned herself more forcefully. "What shall you say to Felton Andrews?"

"I shall not say a word," Abigail proclaimed, jutting her chin into the air. "I shall behave just as planned. There is no need to blush like Catherine."

Oh, but the teasing was so vexing, for the flush continued! There was no chance that it would cool before Simmons and Andrews were upon them. So be it. There was no time to remedy the situation, and Catherine would do her best to be composed.

It was not long before the two men had joined their company, and Catherine observed that Simmons was ever taller when so nearby! His towering presence was gracious and genteel. She could feel it, for she dared not look at him directly once more.

"Good evening, ladies," Felton Andrews said, bowing his head politely.

"Good evening, Mr Andrews," Abigail replied with the most admirable

composure. "I hope that you are enjoying yourselves."

"We are immensely," Simmons said, his voice impossibly deep.

Catherine wanted nothing more than to look up at him and see those ocean eyes from such a close proximity, but she could not bear to do it! She wished to conceal the flush, although she felt his eyes upon her, and she knew that he had no doubt seen it all too plainly.

"My lord, to what do we owe this honour?" Selina asked, still pumping her fan nervously.

"My friend, Mr Andrews, thought it best that we chat for a bit."

"How very forward of you, Mr Andrews," Abigail said with a tight smile.

Andrews cleared his throat. "I could not help it. You were attracting my attention from across the room."

How very forward, indeed! Abigail's jaw dropped open at this admission, and Catherine could not help but smile. It was humorous that moments ago, Abigail said that he would present a cool demeanour, and now she was lighting up just as Catherine had when she made eye contact with Simmons! How the tables had turned.

Beside her, she heard Simmons laugh, and Catherine finally looked up at him, delighting in his smile. Their eyes locked yet again, and

Simmons said, "I am told that you are Lady Catherine Trowbridge."

"You have heard correctly. I am indeed that lady," she replied humorously.

"Why have I never seen you before?"

"I do not attend these events often," Catherine admitted. "If I were to be perfectly honest, I would say that this is not my cup of tea."

Simmons seemed intrigued by this. "Why is that?"

"I am unsure." She shrugged. "I suppose that there are just so many people. I enjoy my own company far too much."

Simmons smiled warmly yet again. "Yes, I can see that."

"What do you mean?" Catherine asked, entirely forgetting that Selina, Abigail, and Andrews were still in attendance.

"You strike me as the sort of lady that fancies her books and horses."

Was Simmons seeing right through her? "I can say with some surety that you have observed my character precisely."

“I am much the same. It is not often that I attend balls and parties.”

“Oh, but you should!” Selina exclaimed. “Your company is always requested, I am sure.”

Simmons seemed confused by this. “Requested?”

Selina went on. “Yes, do you not receive invitations to all the most important balls.”

Simmons scratched his chin. “I suppose that I do.”

Andrews clapped him on the back. “I am afraid that my esteemed friend does not think much of such things. Like Lady Trowbridge, he prefers to read his books and tend to his horses.” Andrew raised his brow as he looked at Simmons.

Catherine was at a loss for words, which was not uncommon for her. Was Andrews implying that she and Simmons were similar in some regard? And what was it with the arched brow, as though he was being mischievous?

Just then, the music started up once more and ladies and gentlemen took to the dance floor. Abigail went with Andrews, leaving Catherine, Selina, and Simmons entirely alone. Oh, but she felt her heart race once more.

“Would you care to dance, my lord?” Selina asked.

Catherine could not believe her ears. Selina knew that it was a scandal to ask a gentleman of Simmons’ standing for a dance. Still, Simmons appeared respectful and complied. As they departed, he turned back to look at Catherine once more, and she felt her knees go weak.

Chapter 3

Jasper was in a state of shock. Catherine's presence had been more appealing than expected, and what's more, he felt an instant affinity towards her. This could not be said for Selina Lockhart, who seemed to talk on endlessly as they danced.

"The three of us are rather fortunate," Selina said.

"Why is that?" Jasper asked in curiosity.

"Our chaperones keep such a remarkable distance! Of course, it is uncommon for Lady Trowbridge and I to attend such events, but when we do, we hardly see our chaperones all evening. It is such a benefit, you see, because so many ladies have their chaperones breathing down their necks all evening. But this is not the case for us."

Jasper found Selina's outburst of information endearing, but he thought that she spoke so much out of nervousness more than anything else. "And what do you and Lady Trowbridge do when you are not attending balls?" Jasper asked humorously.

"Just as she said. Oh, Lady Trowbridge is much more shy than I am. But we enjoy reading books in the library, and I will go on the occasional ride. That being said, horses do frighten me considerably. What is it that you like to do, my lord?"

"I enjoy riding horses, past compare. But I am also keen on travelling and have my eyes set on a grand tour."

“How marvellous!” Selina exclaimed.

Jasper felt his heart sink in his chest. Was that really true? Yes, he did want to go on a grand tour, but sadly, he did not know if his health was sound enough to undertake such a venture. Certainly, the Dowager Countess would never approve. But since he was so keen on living life to the fullest in spite of his illness, Jasper still had the mind to undertake it.

But then again, something about Catherine Trowbridge was changing his mind....

Since he was in the company of Catherine’s best friend, Jasper decided to capitalize upon the situation. “How long have you and Lady Trowbridge been acquaintances?”

As the dance continued, Selina was mildly out of breath. “I would say that we are far more than acquaintances. She is my greatest friend in the world! We have known each other since we were rather small. I must say, she is the best friend that I could ever ask for.”

Jasper smiled warmly. Yes, Catherine seemed like the kind of lady that would make an excellent friend. “I am happy to hear that. My relationship with Mr Andrews is much the same.”

Just then, the dance concluded, and those on the dance floor applauded, awaiting what the next dance might be. For Jasper, he wished to remove himself from the dance floor as quickly as possible, for that familiar knot came to his stomach and sweat clung to his brow.

“Would you care to dance again?” Selina asked. “Although I know that it would create a scandal.”

“Lady Lockhart, if you will excuse me, I am in need of refreshment.”

She seemed momentarily taken back that he had not invited her to go with him but considering that a fit of ill health was upon him, Jasper wished for privacy.

“It has been a pleasure, my lord,” Selina said with a curtsy.

As Jasper walked away, fear took hold. The fits were gaining in frequency, and it left him to wonder if one day, every moment would feel as gruelling. What if he were to faint for all eyes to see? No, no. He shook his head and banished that thought. Although the prognosis was grim, there was still a chance that the Lord might be merciful and set him free. At least, that was what he hoped.

Taking a cool glass of lemonade, Jasper turned to scan the ballroom, noting that Felton was still dancing with Abigail. This brought a smile to his lips, for Jasper liked to see his friend so full of gaiety. But still, there was momentary jealousy, for Felton was still in prime health, and alas, Jasper was not.

All of these thoughts melted away on a cloud as he viewed Catherine once more, speaking with someone whom he assumed to be her chaperone, based upon the woman’s appearance. He remembered what Selina had said about their chaperones keeping a distance. Still, this was a prime opportunity to speak with Catherine since they

would not be alone.

Feeling his health instantly return, Jasper set down his glass of lemonade and approached, watching Catherine's stunning green eyes turn to him. His gaze was unwavering as Jasper wanted her to know exactly how much interest he had in her.

"I hope that I am not intruding," Jasper said, bowing his head.

Catherine appeared to be quite shocked by his approach. "Of course not, my lord. I am grateful to have your company."

"That is a kind sentiment," Jasper replied with a smile. He turned his attention towards the chaperone, who blinked several times then turned away. "Your friend Lady Lockhart is a kind woman."

"She is my dearest friend. I do not know how I would get on without her."

"I am sure that you would find a way," he suggested warmly.

"Might I ask, my lord, why it is that you turn down so many invitations?"

Jasper briefly considered this. "I suppose it is because these events make me rather nervous." It was an admission that he had not anticipated making.

“Is that so? Why, that is precisely why I rarely come! But I do not receive countless invitations. There are very few that know of me.”

What a horrible disadvantage to them, Jasper thought to himself.

“You should attend more balls. I am sure that there are many who would benefit from your company.”

Catherine laughed. “I do not know if my more introverted ways bring much of a benefit to anything. Often, I cannot even think of the right thing to say.”

“I share that same sentiment. I am always saying the first thing that pops into my head,” Jasper quipped. “And I can say with some certainty that is not the right course of action.”

They both laughed with ease. As Catherine did so, Jasper took the time to examine her profile, which was both delicate and lovely in every way. Was it that Catherine reminded him of someone? Was that why he could not help but stare? For looking at her, he was quite convinced that she had a familiar face and that he had known her all of his life.

“You must have danced heartily,” Catherine remarked.

“Why do you say that?”

“You have sweat clinging to your brow,” she said, no small measure of concern in her voice.

Jasper brought a hand up to his forehead and wiped the sweat away. Oh, but that horrible dread returned as he realized that it was from his illness and not from the dancing at all. Of course, it was too soon to explain, but he did feel the inclination to tell her all, even when their friendship was so new. He had the keen sense that she would understand and express her concern.

“I suppose that I did,” he finally said. “As I mentioned, these events make me quite nervous, and I admit to not being the best of dancers.”

Catherine’s face lit up. “Oh, but I watched you! You were an expert dancer, my lord.”

She had watched him? Hmm...There was nothing unappealing about that in the slightest. Jasper enjoyed the notion that Catherine was watching him whilst he danced. Had she been the one dancing, he would have done the same.

“May I have the pleasure of dancing with you before evening’s end?”

Catherine coloured deeply. “I fear that is a bad idea. I am a horrible dancer.”

“Somehow, I do not believe that.”

“Believe it! I would step on your toes. There is no doubt of that.”

Jasper could not help but grin. “I would not take offence. I might even enjoy it.”

The conversation fell silent at that point, and Jasper had to wonder if he had said too much. Although he was sure that if she did step on his toes, he would barely feel it, for she was just a slip of a thing. As the silence continued, he could not help but speak again to make sure he had not startled her. “I am sorry if I have offended.”

“You have not offended. I just find you to be a very amusing gentleman.”

“Why is that?” Jasper asked, his curiosity unbounded.

“Because you are not what I expected you to be. When my friends described you, I thought that you might be an intimidating sort of fellow.”

“How did they describe me?”

Although Jasper rarely cared for what others thought of him, in this instance, the answer would be very important.

“As a man who could claim a wife at any moment, if he chose.”

He did not know what to think of this. Naturally, because of his title, he could have a wife soon, if he wished for one, but in the recesses of his mind, he had to wonder what the point of that would be. It would be a woman who would have to understand his predicament, and that woman would need to be most patient indeed.

“There is no hurry when it comes to such matters,” he assured her, although Jasper thought that when it came to a lady like Catherine Trowbridge, there would very much be a hurry.

“There is no pressure upon you?”

How was he to explain?

Jasper shook his head mournfully. “My mother does not put pressure on me. She understands that I am taking my time.”

Catherine sighed. “I am ever so jealous. My parents put a great deal of pressure upon me.” She reconsidered this. “No, I suppose that is not fair. They are allowing me some freedoms, but they have made it very clear that they wish for me to be married this year.”

Jasper felt that familiar knot in his stomach. She would be married this year? That would be painful to witness. What’s more, he did not like that Catherine seemed displeased by the notion of it. If he could help her to escape, he would.

Which brought up a marvellous idea....

“It is unfortunate that they put this pressure on you. I am sure that it is uncalled for.”

Catherine laughed affably. “I suppose that it is called for. If I was left to my own devices, there is a very good chance that I would never be married at all!”

“I enjoy your spirit!”

“That is what my parents view as the very problem. It is my spirit that instils them with fear, for they think that I am rather headstrong.”

Oh, but this was far too much fun! Jasper loved a headstrong woman, and perhaps he had never met one the likes of Catherine Trowbridge before.

“I think that you should do as you please. Allow your parents to shake in their boots,” he offered humorously, delighting in the amused reaction upon Catherine’s face.

“They already are,” she assured him.

As they gazed at one another, Jasper noted that she did not look away nor did she blush. He saw her strength and independence come through and this was most pleasing to witness, particularly because it only caused her beauty to grow.

“May I ask you something?”

“Of course, my lord.”

“Do you wish to travel one day?” Jasper was unsure why this question was released from his lips.

Catherine’s face lit up with her response. “Very much so! I have been confined to Bath all of my life. There are so many places that I wish to see and adventures I wish to have. I imagine, because of your position, that you have travelled much.”

Jasper’s chest constricted. “That is untrue. I, like you, wish to see much, but there are certain circumstances which prevent it.”

“Such as?” Catherine asked, knitting her brow, and cocking her head to the side.

Before Jasper could get a chance to respond, he felt a clap upon his back, and Felton said, “How are you carrying on, old man?”

Although Jasper dearly loved his friend, it was vexing that Felton chose to intrude at such a moment. “Lady Trowbridge and I were delighting in conversation.” He lifted his brow. “Right before you arrived.”

It was apparent that Felton sensed the invisible jab, for he visibly softened, looking towards Catherine, and saying, "I have intruded."

"Not in the slightest, Mr Andrews. Your company is most welcome."

Despite Catherine's affability, Jasper did wish to tell Felton to back away and give him more time. But seeing that Catherine truly did enjoy Felton's company, Jasper decided to let it go. "How was your dance with Miss Hatchet?" Jasper asked.

Felton cleared his throat and straightened his cravat, clearly proud of himself. "She is a most excellent lady and I delighted in her company. I must say, Lady Trowbridge, you choose exemplary friends."

"She has always been a marvellous friend, and if it were not for her, I would scarce attend any of these events."

Jasper could not help but add, "And if it were not for Mr Andrews, I would never do the same."

Andrew added, "That is what friends are for, my lord. I would hate to see you wasting away in that impressive estate of yours, listening to the Dowager Countess all day long."

It was another delightful jab, and Jasper found himself grinning with teeth closed. Was his estate truly impressive? He really did not think so, but if Catherine was impressed by this statement, then all the better.

But why did he wish to impress her? Catherine seemed the sort of lady that was very much not impressed by such things. It was the simple things in life that she had a taste for, and that was why Jasper was so instantly fond of her.

“Where is the champagne?” Felton asked, looking all around.

Jasper replied humorously, “If you have to inquire, then you already have had too much champagne, for it is in the same spot where you found it the first time.”

“That is not true in the slightest,” Felton assured him. “There were footmen passing it on trays. They have entirely disappeared. Surely, this is a poorly managed ballroom.”

To this, all of them laughed, and Jasper’s attention was returned to the chaperone, whom he had nearly forgotten was in attendance. The woman scowled as though displeased with this latest interaction. So be it. If Catherine was having a good time, as she seemed to be, then that was all that mattered to Jasper in that moment.

Felton finally mentioned, “We should invite Lady Trowbridge and Lady Hatchet to supper sometime at your estate. I am sure that their parents would be amenable.”

Jasper examined Catherine’s response to this. She seemed at a loss for words, and so he decided to be of assistance. “Lady Trowbridge, you would be most welcome at my estate... any time.”

Chapter 4

Once the ball had concluded, Catherine was on cloud nine, but she could not understand why she had ascended to such a great height! Was it because she finally let down her inhibitions, ever so slightly, to attend the ball? No, it was certainly because of the presence of the Earl of Simmons.

“What a marvellous night!” Abigail exclaimed as they walked through the gardens with the moon overhead. “I had such a wonderful time dancing with Mr Andrews.”

Selina remarked, “It seems that you have a new man that you are in love with each week, Abigail. I beg of you not to break Mr Andrews’ heart.”

“I would never do such a thing,” Abigail assured her. “In fact, I have the mind to tell him that I am equally as fond of him as he is of me.”

“How do you know that he is fond of you?” Catherine asked, genuinely interested.

“It is the way that he looks at me,” she replied dreamily. “The way that he dances with me. There is no doubt in my mind that he is in love with me.”

Catherine thought this nearly preposterous. How could Abigail make such an assumption? She also hoped that Abigail would not break his heart, for Mr Andrews seemed like an amusing and kind man.

Oh, why did it even matter? Why was Catherine asking for the signs of love? It was all too clear. She wished to know if Simmons might have such feelings for her.

“You have a very fine evening,” Abigail said suggestively. I saw the Earl speaking with you for quite some time. Is there anything that you wish to share, Catherine?”

Before answering this, she turned to see if they were in earshot of their chaperones, who were following behind but at a great distance. “The Earl is a very kind man. I did enjoy his company.”

“And?” Selina exclaimed, seemingly eager to hear more.

“And nothing more. I have not spent enough time with him to answer further. I found his presence most agreeable, which was surprising, at first.”

“Why should that be surprising?” Abigail asked.

“Because of the way you described him! You made him sound as though he were the most intimidating man in all of Christendom. But he was not like that at all. The Earl of Simmons and I...we have much in common.”

The girls fell silent, and Catherine was left to wonder what they might be thinking of her response. Did they think that she was withholding, or even worse, lying? Well, Catherine would tell them no more

because there was nothing else that she was willing to say. The sensation within her was still too new, and she did not know how to broach the subject.

Abigail wrapped her arm around Catherine's waist as they continued to walk, the cool evening air kissing their skin. "Do you see how much fun you can have when you release yourself from your shell? I daresay, you could have met countless men like Simmons, had you come out with me sooner."

This had to have been a lie, for there was no one like Simmons that Catherine had ever met in her life! Never had she met a man that comported himself with such ease and affability. Was that merely because she had not ventured into society enough?

"I would like to be more outgoing," Catherine admitted. "It is rather trying at first dealing with all of the nerves, but as my parents said, I need to find a husband." She turned downcast at the very thought of it.

"I am sure that the Earl of Simmons could be a good candidate," Abigail said suggestively. "He needs to find a wife, after all."

Catherine felt her skin tingle. The thought of marrying the Earl was too much to bear, and she tossed the idea aside. "Let us not talk of such things. And besides, the earl mentioned that there is no need for him to take a wife in the immediate future, and what's more, there is still no indication that he has those kinds of thoughts about me."

There was silence yet again. Did Selina and Abigail know something that she did not? If so, they refused to share it, for the silence continued for a considerable length of time.

Within this silence, Catherine's thoughts yet again returned to the Earl. He had mentioned them coming to his estate for supper. Had he made the same request to Selina? For surely, it would be most nerve-racking for Catherine to attend such a supper by herself. Her chaperone would be there, of course, but it would still be most overwhelming.

"Selina?" Catherine inquired. "Did the Earl make any future plans with you?" she asked, her voice hushed.

"Of what nature?" Selina asked, brimming with curiosity.

"Oh, I do not even know what I am referring to," Catherine replied, tossing her hand in the air. "It was a slip of the tongue."

"Ha!" Abigail exclaimed. "Did you make future plans with *you*, Catherine?"

Her two friends stopped and now all eyes were upon Catherine. It was horrible to be put on the spot so, and she huffed, wishing that her friends would change the subject once more.

"No, it is not that," she replied, telling a fib. "It is just that she and the Earl were dancing for such a considerable length of time, that I had to wonder."

Selina frowned, gazing up at the moon. "The Earl made no such plans.

Oh, I feel like such a fool for asking him to dance. I know that he was being polite in accepting! And then, I was foolish enough to ask him to dance again!”

Catherine asked, “What did he say?”

Shoulders slumped, Selina replied, “He excused himself and said that he was in need of refreshment. I must say, there was something strange in his response. Perhaps he thought me impossibly forward.”

Catherine’s heart broke for Selina because she could sense that her friend was disparaged. She brought a hand to her shoulder. “Do not fear. The Earl is a kind man, and I am sure that was not it. Perhaps he was parched.”

Selina shook her head. “It was something different than that. His eyes became glassy and there was something fearful in his expression. I must say that I was a bit taken aback by it.”

A wave of fear came over Catherine as she remembered the sweat that had clung to his brow. Had there truly been something amiss? No, that was not possible, for once they started conversing, he had seemed as right as rain.

The ladies continued their walk, which led them to a marvellous fountain, the water of which reflected the bright light of the moon. They sat on the lip of it, their chaperones seating themselves on a nearby bench. Catherine dipped her fingers into the water, feeling the coolness. She sighed to herself, thinking that overall, it had been an exceptionally pleasing evening and she would have changed none of it for the world.

“These are the healing waters,” Abigail said with assurance. “They run it in from the spas of Bath. At least, that is what the host expressed to me.”

Catherine felt gratitude rush through her. Yes, she loved her hometown of Bath. There was nowhere else in the world that she would rather be, but the Earl's remark about travelling certainly stirred something in her. She truly did wish to travel! Bath was her home, but there were so many things in the world to explore and so many places to see.

She sincerely hoped that she married a man who was fond of travel, as well. Oh, but why was she thinking of men so frequently that evening? Catherine secretly scolded herself.

As they chatted and carried on, Catherine found herself wondering when she would see the Earl of Simmons again. Would she have to attend several balls in order to encounter him? No, he had invited her to his estate! Certainly, she would invite Selina and Abigail to come along. Catherine was unsure of how she could bear it without their company.

The evening came to a close when the chaperones finally decided that the hour had grown too late. They each found their separate carriages and departed, but not before several embraces and plans to meet again the day after tomorrow. During the ride home, Catherine gazed out the window at the moon, which was now brighter than ever.

Where was Simmons right now? Certainly, he had returned to his estate, or he and Mr Andrews were out late carousing. Though Simmons did not seem like the sort of fellow that cared for such things.

The chaperone finally said, “I am sure that your father will be pleased that you encountered the Earl.”

“It is of no consequence. He is merely a new friend.”

“A new friend with a great deal of money, he is.”

Catherine assured her, “As I said, it is of no consequence.”

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